

NOVEL

1

WRITTEN BY

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ILLUSTRATED BY

NAJI Yanagida



REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING

VISIT...

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1:

A Walking Egg

PART 1

I WOKE UP IN THE DARK, feeling dazed and hot like my head was on fire. I couldn't think straight. I felt trapped and lonely. Despite those awful feelings, an inexplicable sense of relief washed over me.

Then something split with a *crack*. A single beam of light entered my stuffy, pitch-black world. I peered through to take a look outside.

Seeing through the narrow hole was difficult, but I could faintly make out sunlight filtering through tree branches.

So...I guess I'm in a forest or something?

I tried to stand up, but another cracking sound came from beneath my feet. At first I thought I'd stepped on something. Then I realized I'd actually stepped *through* something.

I tried to look down at my feet to check, but for some reason my neck was stuck. I couldn't budge it at all.

What the heck happened to me?

As soon as I wondered that, a display that reminded me of a video game screen popped into my head.

Species: Dragon Egg Status: Normal

Lv: 1/5

HP: 5/5

MP: 1/1

Attack: 1

Defense: 3

Magic: 1

Agility: 10

Rank: F

Special Skills:

Eggshell: Lv —

Divine Voice: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 1

View Status: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Um...isn't this just like that thing that always pops up in RPGs?

Next, a line of text appeared inside my head.

Status Screen has been opened.

Huh? A status screen? What's going on? What does this mean?

Status Screen displays the numerical value of *'s abilities in a simplified text box.**

Wait, did you just answer me?

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 1 is an ability which explains status attributes and items. It can also provide information regarding changes in status.

What? I really have no idea what's going on. Hang on—is this a game or

something?

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 1 is unable to provide that explanation.

Huh? You keep saying “Lv 1.” Does that mean you can provide the explanation if I level up this “Divine Voice” thing or whatever? Also, who’s speaking to me right now?

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 1 is unable to provide that explanation.

Who are you? And more importantly, where am I?

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 1 is unable to provide that explanation.

This conversation was beginning to feel pointless, like trying to play catch with yourself by throwing a baseball against the wall. The voice kept evading the important questions with canned phrases. I doubted that I was talking to an actual person—it seemed more like a machine. I decided to give up on getting answers from the weird voice inside my head and instead look for someone I could actually understand.

I peered through the crack again.

It’s so hard to see, though. Can’t I do something about this? Not being able to see my feet is especially dangerous—Whoa, I lost my footing! Ouch! I definitely fell from something tall just now!

Apparently I’d been nestled up in a tree. I somehow survived the fall, even though it felt like I fell from pretty high up.

Gained Resistance Skill “Fall Resistance” Lv 1.

Resistance skill... Does that mean surviving the fall powered me up? Oh! My HP decreased from 5 to 3 on the Status Screen! If it gets to zero, do I die? Oh no! This is a dream, right? This has to be a dream!

Gained Special Skill “Klutz” Lv 1.

Now that’s just rude! What’s your problem, Divine Voice? What gives you the right to spy on me and make fun of me in the first place, huh?! Why even bother to call it a special skill when it’s literally just an insult?

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 1 is unable to provide that explanation.

You irritating little... You're doing this on purpose just to aggravate me, aren't you? Whatever. I'll just get stressed out if I let this stupid voice get to me.

I wanted to check out the tree I just fell out of, but I couldn't look that far up. The crack was too small for me to see much through it and, more importantly, I still couldn't move my neck.

What the heck is wrong with it, anyway? Oh, hey! There's a pool of water over there. I'll go look at my reflection to see what's up.

I somehow managed to waddle over to the water and look down.

Instead of my reflection, I saw a big egg. It had two small holes for the eyes and two more for the stubby feet. The shell was covered in hairline cracks. By any standards, this was just an incredibly peculiar egg.

Huh? What is that? I was expecting my reflection, not some monster in the water waiting to attack me! Scared the shell outta me... Is this a joke or something? Wait...it's still there. And when I shift to look, it moves. Is that...me? That's really me? I'm an egg?! No way! What the heck is going on here?! Answer me, Divine Voice!

Dragon Egg: F Rank Monster. A baby dragon that is sentient even in its unhatched state. Since it is not yet fully developed, it will die if the egg breaks.

This has gotta be some kinda weird yolk...I mean joke. I can't believe that's me. This is about as bad as letting a little fetus walk around and think on its own!

It is alert but powerless. Its brain is underdeveloped, and its only ability is rolling.

Hey! Whose brain is underdeveloped? I'm thinking all kinds of things right now, in case you weren't aware!!

Although quite dangerous when grown, the developing embryo is prized as a delicacy due to its rarity and delicious flavor.

Now you're calling me delicious? You're the absolute worst, Divine Voice!

Therefore, it is common practice among adventurers to kill it on sight and

take the egg. This is not advised, however, because the parent dragon may be nearby and can follow the egg's scent.

No! What?! You're kidding, right? Kill it on sight? I'm an egg, not a cockroach!! And what do you mean, adventurers and dragons? What is going on?!



PART 2

TWO WILD DAYS PASSED, as I ran away from progressively weirder and weirder monsters: hungry black crocodiles and gigantic mean bugs. All I knew for certain was that I woke up in some kind of crazy forest, and I was an egg.

This forest couldn't be in Japan. I was definitely in some other country. I wasn't sure which one, but there had to be plenty of places out there filled with hungry black crocodiles and gigantic mean bugs, not to mention klutzy walking eggs and scary four-armed bears.

Okay, so I didn't really know that much about the world outside Japan. I should've studied more. I had no idea things were so terrible overseas. It made me want to cry.

During all this, I gained two more skills: Hunger Resistance and Poison Resistance. I unlocked both of them when I got so hungry I ate a random mushroom I found. I got a terrible stomachache. And I mean *terrible*. I was totally at death's door.

It hurt so bad that my whole life flashed before my eyes. Well, all two days of it so far. Afterward, though, getting new skills made the pain worth it. I decided to try practicing my skills, starting with Roll. All I had to do was focus, and then I just instinctively began to move. Before long I was rolling all over the woods. Zoom!

Rolling was so fun that I kept it up. Before I knew it, Roll hit Lv 2. Then I rolled off a cliff and Fall Resistance was Lv 2, too! Nice! The impact of the fall widened the crack in my shell, so I could even see better!

The trade-off was that I almost died.

Hey, Divine Voice? I'm really tired... I just wanna go home, take a shower, and eat a bag of chips. How do I do that?

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 1 is unable to provide that explanation.

Can I really level with you for a sec? I'm so lonely that I feel like I'm gonna die. I really think I'm about to start crying. Can eggs cry?

Gained Resistance Skill “Loneliness Resistance” Lv 1.

Oh, hey. Thanks, I guess. You really don’t have to go to all that trouble.

I appreciated the gesture, but that wasn’t what I actually wanted. I wanted to feel someone else’s warmth. I didn’t want to be strong, I wanted to live my life as a man—no, an egg—who acknowledged his own weaknesses. It sounded ridiculous when I phrased it like that.

What was I even doing before I wound up here, anyway? I couldn’t remember at all. I knew I was Japanese, and I was pretty sure that monsters didn’t exist. What’s more, I wasn’t even sure if I was a guy or a girl. I *felt* like a guy, but how could I know?

Did I get kidnapped and taken to some secret lab where they messed with my body and shipped me off to some other country to fight four-armed bears?!
Well, Divine Voice? What’s your guess?

Gained Title Skill “Just an Idiot” Lv 1.

Cut it out. This is starting to actually hurt my feelings. Also, can you stop being so...clinical? Just talk to me normally. Or wait—don’t tell me you’re secretly shy or something.

Since I kept accumulating all these strange skills, I decided to check the Status Screen again. Over the past two days I’d learned that, the same as it worked with Roll, if I focused hard enough, I could make that display pop up in my head whenever I wanted. Useful, right?

Species: Dragon Egg

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/5

HP: 5/5

MP: 1/1

Attack: 1

Defense: 3

Magic: 1

Agility: 10

Rank: F

Special Skills:

Eggshell: Lv —

Divine Voice: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Fall Resistance: Lv 2

Hunger Resistance: Lv 1

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 2

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Hey, my Klutz skill leveled up, too! Not that I needed the reminder... This

Status thing is pretty useful, though.

My HP seemed to recover with sleep. After the fall, I'd been extra careful not to get hurt over the past two days. I stayed far away from monsters and satisfied my hunger with fallen fruit and small bugs. When I got thirsty, I drank the water from a cool spring, and when I ate suspicious mushrooms, I writhed in unbearable agony. In other words, I did my best to survive.

I resisted the bugs at first, but eventually I got hungry enough to give in to desperation. Better than the mushrooms, at least.

To be real for a second, I felt kind of pathetic that I'd only held out two days on my staunch no-eating-bugs line before I gave in. But who could blame me? This hunger was way worse than any I remembered experiencing as a human. Maybe I was going through a growth spurt? I was an egg, after all. If I wasn't going through a growth spurt now, when would I be?

The Divine Voice kept saying stuff about me being a baby dragon, but I sure didn't feel like one. Was I growing at all? Did I have to level up *before* I could get bigger? How, though? By fighting monsters? There was no way I could do that! I was an *egg*!

Wait, eggs hatch in nests, don't they? I thought I fell out of a tree, but what if I had actually fallen out of a dragon's nest *in* the tree? *I should go back and check. I think it's over there—oh, no!*

A grotesque caterpillar thing had crawled out from between the trees. I'd been too deep in this whole "thinking" business to notice.

This gigantic gross bug was a darkwurm, and it had been playing hide and seek with me ever since the day I got here. To be clear, I was the one who was hiding.

Besides the darkwurm, the forest's monsters mostly politely ignored me. And as long as I stayed still, most of the animals would just walk right past me, too. The Divine Voice mentioned that dragon parents attacked anyone who touched a dragon egg. Maybe the other animals knew about that, too.

But then why did this stupid darkwurm keep coming after me?!

I squinted at it, bringing up my View Status skill.

Species: Darkwurm

Status: Normal

Lv: 3/8

HP: 8/12

MP: 3/5

Attack: 5

Defense: 2

Magic: 3

Agility: 8

Rank: F

Special Skills:

Caterpillar: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 1

Call Allies: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Egg Eater: Lv 1

Uh-oh, that wasn't good. Its stats were nearly all higher than mine. I had

slightly better agility, which was probably how I'd accidentally managed to outrun it so far. And I definitely didn't love the look of that Title Skill, Egg Eater: Lv 1.

That must have been why this creep was following me. It definitely earned that skill by eating, although I didn't even want to imagine it. We weren't going to be friends. There would be no mutual understanding between me and the darkwurm. And even if I got away for a while, it totally had the vibe of a jerk who'd ambush me in my sleep.

But I also noticed that its HP was pretty low. *Should I fight it now, before it has a chance to attack?* It was a higher level than me, but I had better defense and agility. I was pretty confident I could take it in a single hit. *Yeah! I'm gonna go for it!* If I won, I could probably level up, and maybe even hatch. That would be the end of this egg life where all I could do was roll around. *Get ready to meet your maker, darkwurm!*

PART 3

THE DARKWYRM wiggled towards me, drooling. It thought the game was over, and now it was dinnertime.

Bring it on, wormy jerk! I'll lure you out to better terrain and kick your tail. I don't wanna spend the rest of my life as an egg. This game of cat and mouse is over!

The Status Screen told me that I had better defense and agility than the wyrm, but it had me beat in all its other stats. Most notably, its attack power was far better than mine. Its HP was low, but mine was way lower. If this nasty guy landed just one hit on me, I was done.

Should I use my agility to strike first? That would give me an advantage, but all it would take was one counterattack and my egg life would be cut short. That was why my plan was to move to more favorable terrain, get the first strike, and deplete its HP before it could attack me back. I had no idea what attack I should use or how much damage I would do—but I thought it was a pretty good plan, considering the circumstances.

"Sssshhk!" the darkwurm hissed.

Okay! I gotta get away from it! Just keep running!

I rolled up a hill, quickly scanning my surroundings for a good place to make my stand. I wanted to find a place with a small drop—just a few meters, so that even if I fell it wouldn't break my shell. I spotted a small bluff and rolled alongside it.

All right, it's still following me. That's a good darkwurm. Just keep it up!

I slowed down a little, drawing the darkwurm in closer.

"Sssshhk!" It must have seen that my stamina was dropping, because its cries were growing distinctly pleased. It was probably thinking, *"Oooh, now I'll finally get to eat a delicious egg!"*

Ha! Pretty cocky for a wyrm. It probably thought that I was an idiot since I was just an egg. Well, I'd show it! This fight was as good as over. I'd slow it down,

and then circle around as fast as I could. Since the darkwurm's body was so long, it'd take it a while to turn itself all the way around.

Putting my plan into action, I pulled my legs up into my shell and used Roll. The skill was Lv 2 now, so I could use it without slowing down, and even accelerate abruptly. My plan worked. The darkwurm couldn't keep up with how fast I was rolling. I took the opportunity to pick up speed and crash into its flank.

"Gchkkk!"

The friction of me spinning against the darkwurm's skin started to rub it away. I threw my weight against it and charged forward with all my might.



This wouldn't be enough to drain its stamina, of course, but that was where the cliff came in.

I used my momentum to wrap the darkwurm up around my spherical surface, and dove off the edge. We hurtled toward the ground, the centrifugal force of my spins combining with gravity to ensure the wurm hit the ground first. I had Fall Resistance Lv 2, and it had Fall Resistance Lv nothing.

Please be enough. If this doesn't do it, I'm out of ideas.

"Eghhhh!"

We crashed into the ground. The darkwurm cushioned my fall, but the impact still rocked through my entire shell. The wurm was stunned and curled into a ball. Blue-black liquid streamed from its mouth as it collapsed.

Oof, looks like I took a bunch of damage, too.

Maybe I put too much faith in Fall Resistance. But as long as I took the wurm with me, it was worth it.

Unfortunately, my enemy began to rise unsteadily back up.

What? You've gotta be kidding me. C'mon, buddy, chill out! You're bleeding from every orifice! Don't you think you've earned a nice, long nap?

The darkwurm turned its vacant bug eyes on me. Digging its heavy back half into the ground, it reared up furiously.

Huh? What's it gonna do? It looks pissed.

"Gggchhkkkk!"

It let out one last horrible cry before falling back to the ground.

J-jeez, that scared me. But it's dead...right? It's dead for real this time?

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

Whoa, good for you, Walking Egg. Way to go get that EXP!

Dragon Egg's Lv has increased from 1 to 5.

Dragon Egg has achieved MAX Lv.

Evolution Requirements have been fulfilled.

I won! I won! All I actually did was run away, but I beat it!

I leveled up a lot, too. Was it due to the Walking Egg title skill? I was still a little confused by the title skills, but apparently they gained levels on their own, but passively boosted other things, too—and it seemed like Walking Egg was giving me a *lot* of experience points. The darkwurm sure made an awfully weird noise when it died, way higher pitched than its other cries. Well, it was dead, so no longer my problem.

What now? Should I take the time to eat the wurm? I'd chowed down on enough bugs at this point that this wasn't going to give me pause. After all, I required lots of nutrition... Don't underestimate the needs of a growing egg.

Maybe it was because I leveled up, but I could really feel my body inside of the egg beginning to take shape. A fragment of shell near my mouth cracked and flaked off, perhaps knocked loose by my fall. I could feel my teeth now. Gingerly, I closed and opened my jaw, chomping my teeth.

Yeah, I can move them!

Excited by my newfound dentition, I leaned over and bit into the darkwurm's back with a crunch. The wurm's bitter fluids seeped out and filled my mouth.

PART 4

AFTER I FINISHED my darkwurm dinner, I checked my status. Hadn't it mentioned something earlier about evolving?

Species: Dragon Egg

Status: Normal

Lv: 5/5 (Max)

HP: 5/9

MP: 5/5 (Max)

Attack: 5

Defense: 8

Magic: 3

Agility: 15

Rank: F

Special Skills:

Eggshell: Lv —

Divine Voice: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Fall Resistance: Lv 2

Hunger Resistance: Lv 1

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King’s Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 2

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Wow, my stats just keep getting higher!

Since I’d hit max level, I figured I could evolve. But how? Evolution meant I could become something other than an egg, right? Some kind of actual creature?

Display Evolution Pattern?

The words popped into my head as if my mind was being read.

Man, Divine Voice. And here I thought you were just a heartless jerk. I guess you can be pretty considerate when you feel like it. All right! Let’s get outta this egg!

Future:

Baby Dragon Rank D—

Little Dragon Rank D+

Present:

Dragon Egg Rank F

History:

So, what, I had to choose between Baby Dragon and Little Dragon? How was I supposed to know which was better? I guess I could just go by stats and pick Little Dragon since it had a + next to its rating.

Little Dragon: Rank D+. A Small Dragon Species. Keep in mind, even a Small Dragon is larger than a Bear. Its Fire Blaze attack is feared by adventurers.

Oh, there's a description. Man, you're really cool today. Guess the hot part of your hot-cold personality is firing up, huh? I'm glad, I was about to die of loneliness.

Anyway, back to the Little Dragon. Sounded pretty good to me. Maybe I'd finally be able to take on some other monsters. Might as well check the other option, though.

Baby Dragon: Rank D-. Its tender flesh is exceedingly delicious, especially with sauce. Its claws and fangs are short and attack power is low. However, it has many potential abilities and many chances for additional evolution. Baby Dragons are often hunted by other monsters and adventurers.

Well, that sucked. This description might as well be a restaurant review. Nah, I wasn't going to risk it. Little Dragon was the safer choice. I was barely surviving as it was.

If I evolved, I wouldn't be able to rely on my tactic of pretending to be a rock so the other monsters ignored me. I was going to have to fight.

Get stronger.

Huh? I just saw more words in my head. Is that you, Divine Voice? Doesn't sound like you. I didn't know you could sound emotional.

Get stronger. Get stronger. Get stronger.

Get stronger. Get stronger. Get stronger.

What? What's going on?

You have only one goal: to gain power. Otherwise, you won't be anything but a common rock.

But I...expect more from you.

Don't disappoint me.

Divine Voice...?

"Divine Voice" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Just now?

Following the notification of its level increase, the voice went silent.

It was freaky, in the same way coming across a glitch in a video game could be. A uniquely unsettling experience that wasn't intended by the game developer... What should I do? Should I go for Baby Dragon after all? Divine Voice sure seemed to feel strongly about it, and to be honest, I was more afraid of it than the monsters. Divine Voice could get inside my head, and it appeared to have high expectations of me.

It told me to become powerful. Get stronger. Be the strongest. Well, if that was the goal, I might as well do the thing properly. Turning into a Baby Dragon *would* be the greater challenge, and I'd *still* be stronger than I was as an egg.

Time to make up my mind.

Whatever creepy entity Divine Voice actually was, it was all I had to rely on. Better to keep it on my side as long as I could.

"The strongest." I had to admit, I did like the sound of that. *All right, let's go. I choose Baby Dragon. And don't start thinking this decision had anything to do with you, Divine Voice. I'm making it on my own.*

No sooner had I thought this that my egg prison began to shatter. God, my body felt so much lighter now that I wasn't carrying around that heavy shell!

Lost Special Skill "Eggshell" Lv 1.

Gained Special Skill "Dragon Scale" Lv 1.

Due to Title Skill "Dragon King's Son" Lv —, all Resistance Skills less than Lv 5 have increased.

For real? *Isn't enhancing Resistance Skills kind of cheating?*

Gained Normal Skill "Baby's Breath" Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill "Whistle" Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill "Lovebite" Lv 1.

Wow, okay... *That's a lot of Normal Skills. Is it just me, or do they sound kinda...adorable?* Were they actually going to help me? I really didn't think I had time to go around giving lovebites and whistling.

Species: Baby Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/25

HP: 5/15

MP: 5/5

Attack: 6

Defense: 5

Magic: 6

Agility: 10

Rank: D-

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 1

Divine Voice: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Fall Resistance: Lv 3

Hunger Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 1

Baby's Breath: Lv 1

Whistle: Lv 1

Lovebite: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 2

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Wow, that was a huge stat increase all the way across the board. I wouldn't have thought just one level would make such a difference. Maybe I'd hit dragon puberty, or something.

I walked over to a nearby spring to check out my reflection. My body was yellow and I had big, round eyes. I had wings sprouting out of my back, though they were almost embarrassingly small.

Aw, I guess I'm pretty cute.

But cute or not, I didn't seem to have gained many useful skills. I definitely couldn't fly yet. When I tried to flap my wings, all they did was twitch a little bit. I was absolutely dying to soar through the sky, but I guessed that would have to

wait. The Divine Voice wanted me to grow stronger. I had no idea what it was up to, but I knew I didn't want to let it down.

PART 5

A_{HHH}, refreshing!

Drinking was so difficult when I was inside the egg. It was a constant struggle to get water past the cracks. Now, it was like I'd been reborn. Well, I guess "re-hatched" since, ya know. Egg.

As I was drinking from the lake, I heard a sudden terrible noise behind me. I turned very slowly and faced down a mass of shadows lurking in the forest.

"Shhkkk!"

"Shhkkk!"

"Kshhkh!"

"Shkshkshk!"

"Shhkkk!"

I knew that sound. Darkwyrms. Plural. There were a lot of them. They showed themselves all at once, appearing along the same path I'd taken to get to the lake.

There must have been twenty at least, and the sight of them was awe-inspiring. Did they often run in packs like this? What were they doing here, anyway? Oh god, I hoped it wasn't because...

I thought of that horrible cry the darkwurm let out just before it died, and I remembered that skill I'd seen on its Status Screen: Call Allies. Great. So it managed to get one last dig in before it kicked the bucket.

It took everything I had just to defeat one of them, so how was I supposed to get rid of this many at once? But those doubts burned off as quickly as they'd come, and I felt a strange burst of excitement.

I just don't think I'm gonna lose. Sorry, darkwyrms. But I'm not a little egg anymore.

The wyrms slithered around me until I was completely surrounded. Then they attacked. I released a gout of fire, the Baby's Breath skill I gained when I

evolved. Just like the others, all I had to do was focus on the skill and I knew how to use it.

The darkwurm directly in front of me rolled onto its back and began to writhe in pain. This was going to work. I charged the wurm and stomped on its midsection as hard as I could.

“Kshhhhk!”

I stomped again, digging my claws into its stomach. A second darkwurm came at me from behind.

Yeah, try it!

Maybe it was because my HP had increased, but getting bitten didn't hurt at all. I was no longer a defenseless egg.

The darkwurms closed in on me from all sides. I tore into them and sent them flying. When one of them recoiled and left its midsection vulnerable to attack, I seized the opportunity and hit it as hard as I could.

Time for one more Baby's Breath!

The weakened darkwurms gradually began to run out of steam, four of them collapsing completely. That left sixteen to deal with. *What? That's all ya got, caterpillars?*

Gained 48 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 48 Experience Points.

Wait, I still had the Walking Egg skill? Thinking about it, the only skill I lost was the Eggshell Special Skill. Was I really going to keep getting double EXP? It felt a little like cheating, but I just put it down to good karma from a previous life.

“Baby Dragon” Lv 1 has become Lv 7.

Gained Title Skill “Infighter” Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill “Dragon Punch” Lv 1.

Whoa, look at all the power I just got! I'm not gonna let even one of these wurms get away. They're a total EXP buffet.

I leapt back into the fray, barreling into them from the side. They tried to bite

my fists, but their teeth didn't even puncture my skin.

I'll punch their lights out. Eat my Dragon Punch! Fire blazed from my fists as I knocked the wyrm's teeth out of its mouth and sent it hurtling through the air in a flaming arc. It landed on its allies just behind it. *And that's two more! Just gotta keep up the momentum.*

I beat them to shreds. Tore them apart and knocked them out, over and over again. My once worthy opponents, reduced to nothing more than a way to farm EXP.

"Kshhhk!"

I landed a Dragon Punch on the last remaining wyrm. It all took less than five minutes. I had a constant stream of messages from the Divine Voice informing me of EXP increases and level-ups. Every time the number climbed higher, I felt more powerful.

Turns out Baby Dragons are pretty strong.

It was a totally different experience from being an egg. I mean, what kind of weird caterpillar could beat a dragon?

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

I still feel like this egg thing is some kind of glitch. It must be why I keep leveling up so fast. My next evolution is at level 25, and I'm gonna get there in no time.

"Baby Dragon" Lv 7 has become Lv 15.

Title Skill "Infighter" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Species: Baby Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 15/25

HP: 3/57

MP: 1/55

Attack: 51

Defense: 35

Magic: 48

Agility: 35

Rank: D-

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 1

Divine Voice: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Fall Resistance: Lv 3

Hunger Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 1

Baby's Breath: Lv 1

Whistle: Lv 1

Lovebite: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 2

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 2

Pest Killer: Lv 1

Not bad, not bad. Unfortunately, my health didn't appear to recover when I evolved or leveled up. My dwindling HP and MP were definitely a concern. I should probably rest up and give myself time to recover.

My agility didn't seem to be leveling up as quickly as my other stats, but it stood to reason that this body type wasn't made for speed. But one thing was clear: becoming the strongest wasn't out of reach after all.

Chapter 2:

The Girl and the Dragon

PART 1

“KYAAAAOOOOH!”

The graywolf howled as I sent it flying through the air with a Dragon Punch. It slammed against a tree and slumped to the ground.

This creature was, as its name suggested, a gray wolf. It was nearly twice my size, and a formidable opponent.

The sun had almost set, so I decided this would be my last conquest for the day.

Gained 24 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 24 Experience Points.

Since defeating that big group of darkwyrms, I was able to attack other monsters much more aggressively, but my level wasn’t really going up that much. Possibly it was due to only choosing battles I was sure I could win; I was always sure to check a monster’s stats before engaging. This got me a Title Skill called Safety First: Lv 1. I was pretty sure Divine Voice was trying to call me a wuss.

My Loneliness Resistance and View Status had also gone up. It made sense, since all I’d been doing was going around checking out statuses, and I was alone all the damn time. The Loneliness Resistance didn’t really seem good for much, though, since I still felt pretty lonely.

Feel free to talk to me more, Divine Voice.

Three days had passed, but I was still only at level 15. I needed five more additional levels before I could evolve again, at level 20.

I’d spent a lot of time searching out and defeating lower-level graywolves. I could take out up to about a Lv 6 with no problems. The one I just defeated was a Lv 6 graywolf who had strayed from his pack.

Maybe I should explore more? The only way to level up was to get more experience, after all. I wouldn't get very far if I kept hunting with Safety First.

New experiences and tougher battles had to be the key to growth. That was true back in Japan, so I was sure things couldn't be all that different here.

But what exactly was my goal? I was surviving just fine, but occasionally the Divine Voice would pop into my head and start pressuring me with the same line, over and over. **Grow stronger.** I knew I shouldn't put blind faith in it to the point of endangering myself, but it was definitely egging me on. Even though I wasn't an egg anymore.

I used Baby's Breath to roast the graywolf. It was a bit gamey, but still exponentially better than giant caterpillars. I just wished I had some salt and pepper.

“Κάνω εγείρουν μου-όπως το όνομα. Και είναι σε θέση να εργαστεί σταθερά!”

I was tearing into my dinner when I suddenly heard voices. I didn't recognize the language, but the voices were definitely human.

“Εγώ, τρομακτικό.”

“Και επειδή αναγνωρίζω μόνο το χέρι της μαγείας, Διαβάστε σωστά.”

I strained to hear as I ate. There were three distinct voices, two men—one young and one old—and a young girl. The younger man sounded casual, while the old man's voice carried a hint of sternness. The girl sounded frightened.

Whoa, there are other people here?

All the Loneliness Resistance in the world couldn't make up for spending so long only interacting with monsters. I couldn't express how much I'd been craving human contact.

Their words were strange to me, but I could make it work. Half of communication was nonverbal, right? I wolfed down the rest of my dinner, eager to finish and find the humans. I swallowed my last mouthful, tossed the bones aside, and rushed off in the direction of the voices. I caught glimpses of a

large, intimidatingly built man through the trees. The other two must be nearby.

“Raaar!”

I tried to call out to them, but the only thing that came out of my mouth was a dragon’s roar. Oh, dammit. I tried to wave my hands reassuringly. I was probably going to level up “Just an Idiot” any time now.

The man looked over at me and froze. Then he grinned. The two other humans stepped into view, both of them focused on me as well. A big tough guy, an old man, and a girl, just as their voices had suggested. Their clothes were strange—armor and robes, like they’d just stepped out of a fantasy story.

Well, I probably shouldn’t be surprised considering the monsters and everything, but was this whole world like that? Eh, I could deal with that later. First I had to win their hearts with my charming growls.

The big guy, who had to be the leader, was looking at me with such a pleased grin on his face. And he continued grinning the whole time as he drew his sword and brandished it at me.



He wasn't anywhere near me, and at first I thought the white streaks bursting out of his sword were some kind of optical illusion. But they slashed through the trees and streaked toward me, their wake rustling the grass. I didn't have time to dodge. Both of my arms were up, leaving my abdomen completely vulnerable. The white slashes hit me in the gut, leaving angry red marks behind.

"Raaar!"

Oww, that really hurt! Way worse than the graywolf! I belatedly checked the guy's stats.

Doz Doglemaad

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 14/45

HP: 38/42

MP: 11/15

Attack: 40+12

Defense: 28+6

Magic: 17

Agility: 22

Equipment:

Weapon: Longsword: D+

Armor: Golden Copper

Armor: D

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 6

Swordsman: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Soul Contamination Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:

Shockwave: Lv 2

Flame Slash: Lv 1

Intimidation: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Novice Warrior: Lv 4

Okay, so...that just now must have been his Shockwave skill. His name was Doz and his species was "Earth-human." So...just a human who lives on Earth? And he thought I was his enemy. I needed to prove to him that I wasn't a threat.

I flapped my arms and made my best friendly face. "*Raa, raar raar!*"

Doz smiled again before unleashing a second Shockwave.

Well okay, buddy. He was determined to fight. *I should probably run.* My level was higher, but I couldn't take on all of them at once.

Shockwave was fast. I guarded myself with my arms. It was better than taking it in the stomach, but it still stung. A few more of those blows and I wouldn't even be able to use my hands.

"Αποφάσεις αγοράς υπεραστικών έχει απομείνει για μένα! φως μαγεία 'ακτίνα'!"

The old man lifted his staff toward me. They weren't stopping. I was just another enemy to them.

Light spewed forth from the tip of his staff, illuminating our surroundings. It was so bright I had to squint. Intense heat flared up over my skin.

What the heck... Was that magic?!

I'd had a passing thought that he looked like a magician with the robes and the staff, but I wasn't expecting actual spells.

"Graaawr!"

I roared, writhing in pain.

Gained Resistance Skill "Magic Resistance" Lv 1.

Flight wasn't an option. I didn't even have time to think before the onslaught began again. If only I'd been a little quicker on my feet... I was a dragon—it was ridiculous to try to approach a human. My loneliness had clouded my judgment.

I wasn't a person anymore. I was a monster. Consider that lesson very painfully learned.

My body felt heavy and numb. I checked my stats. My condition had changed from Normal to Paralyzed.

That's it. They're gonna kill me.

Two sets of footsteps approached cautiously, while a third scampered along out of time.

"Δεν είναι εχθρότητα προς αυτό το δράκο!"

It was the girl. I stretched my aching neck up to find her standing between me and her companions. I couldn't understand her, but tears glistened in her eyes. It sounded like she was pleading.

The old man scratched his head awkwardly. Doz looked from the girl, to the old man, and then to me. He clicked his tongue in aggravation, then sheathed his sword.

Wait...did she just save me?

The girl turned, came closer to me, and petted my head. "Ανάκτηση μαγεία 'υπόλοιπο.'" She said something, and suddenly I was bathed in a gentle light. The numbness and pain that had seized my body began to ease. She peered at my face and smiled, relieved.

"καλός?" she said.

I didn't know this world's language, but I thought I understood what she was trying to say. She was worried about me. She wanted to know if I was all right. I'd been so lonely that those words touched me, sending tears streaming down my face.

"Gwaah..." I cried, trying to tell her "thank you." I thought she must have understood me, because she patted my head again.

Her hand was so soft. The first touch I felt in this new life of mine was warm and comforting.

Doz yelled something at the girl and she snapped back. He frowned in irritation and began to say something else, but the old man stopped him. Doz clicked his tongue again, before he and the old man turned and headed back into the forest.

The girl stayed. Maybe she was worried my paralysis hadn't completely worn off yet. But those two guys were her friends. Shouldn't she go with them?

PART 2

Myria Milleania

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 6/70

HP: 18/20

MP: 4/20

Attack: 12+5

Defense: 14+2

Magic: 25

Agility: 17

Equipment:

Weapon: Withered Staff: F+

Armor: Village Girl Dress: F-

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 5

Mage: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Normal Skills:

Rest: Lv 2

Fireball: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Novice White Mage: Lv 2

The girl who saved me was named Myria. She was probably in her early twenties, but her face, short stature, and messy hair made her look much younger.

She pulled my head onto her lap and stroked my cheeks. I wanted to make sure she didn't get scared and run away, so I stretched out my arms and legs to show how harmless I was and let myself rest. To be honest, the numbness had mostly passed, but I held still and even put on a decent tremble. I was afraid that if Myria decided I was well enough, she would leave. I wanted to stay like this for just a bit longer.

I knew it was selfish of me. But I was so lonely.

Myria peered down at me and asked again if I was all right. Then she said something that could have been "I'm sorry." I didn't understand the words, of course, but I could make a pretty good guess based on her expression and her voice.

Gained Special Skill: "Grecian Language" Lv 1.

Oh? Maybe I'll be able to understand her more after a while, then.

Gained Title Skill: "Liar" Lv 1.

Wow, laying it on pretty thick, aren't you? You've got a terrible personality, Divine Voice. Who the heck do you think you are?

Still, was it just me or was I getting way too many Title Skills way too easily?

Doz and Myria didn't have many Title Skills at all, and they had lived much longer than I had. So where were all the Skills coming from? They were all pretty insulting too. Most likely it had something to do with Divine Voice, but I had no way of knowing.

Myria's max level was incredibly high. Doz's max level was 45, but hers was 70. I didn't know how humans could evolve, so their potential must have a limit. *I bet one day Myria's going to be way stronger than that jerk swordsman.*

I relaxed against her as I pondered. Suddenly I heard screams in the distance. I immediately recognized the voices of Doz and the old man.

Myria froze, looking in the direction of the noise. Gently, she helped me to stand and lean against a tree trunk. Doz's and Myria's stats were very different. Myria had the potential to one day outstrip him, but as of right now he was far more powerful. So if someone like *Doz* was screaming, no way should Myria charge in blindly.

I was hanging on by a thread, so I wouldn't be much help either. I wondered if the Rest skill she'd used on me was some kind of recovery magic. Her MP was low; I doubted she could cast it again. She used the last of her power to heal me.

If Myria ran off to help Doz and the old guy, she'd be defenseless. Her fighting ability was low and she was too drained to use her recovery magic. And she must know that.

"R-raar..." I said.

"τα λέμε," she replied with a sad smile. Then she waved her little hand at me, her expression tense, and ran off towards the voices.

"Raaar!"

I wanted to stop her, but when I tried to move I just fell over. I guess I was still a little paralyzed. I'd assumed that the absence of pain meant I was fully recovered, but apparently not.

"Raa! Raaaaaar!" I yelled after Myria. She slowed and turned back to me, her eyes narrowed with concern. But she just dipped her head and started running again.

Wait! I wished I could yell. There's nothing you can do now!

"GRAAAAAAAAAAOWWWW!"

A noise echoed from deep in the forest, so loud that it shook the ground beneath me. It came from the same direction as Doz and the others' shouts. Although far louder and much more menacing, it reminded me of the noises that I made when I tried to speak.

I knew instinctively that the source of that voice was on an entirely different level from the darkwyrms and graywolves. I couldn't let Myria go off and face it by herself. When I tried to lift my legs, the numbness was still there. None of my limbs moved how I wanted them to. And despite the recovery magic Myria had cast on me, my HP was still half depleted. That added to paralysis meant I'd just end up as monster chow if I went after her.

Nevertheless, I had to do something. I stood up on my trembling legs, the pins and needles gradually wearing off with each uneasy step I took.

I could do this. I would have my mobility back by the time I got there.

I took my time, working my way slowly towards the source of the disturbance. Now that the paralysis was pretty much gone, I took another look at my status.

Species: Baby Dragon

Status: Paralyzed (Slight)

Lv: 20/25

HP: 38/72

MP: 59/68

Attack: 61

Defense: 46

Magic: 58

Agility: 42

Rank: D-

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 1

Divine Voice: Lv 2

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Fall Resistance: Lv 3

Hunger Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 2

Baby's Breath: Lv 2

Whistle: Lv 1

Lovebite: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 3

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 3

Pest Killer: Lv 1

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 1

Yep, half my HP was gone, and surely my enemy's stats would be far stronger than mine. But maybe if Myria, her friends, and I worked together, maybe we could scare it off?

PART 3

BUT BY THE TIME I got there, the fight was over...

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

The dragon let out a triumphant roar. It was gigantic. Much bigger than the humans or little old me, probably over five meters tall, with a long neck. Its body was rough and covered in lumpy, hardened spots that reminded me of rocks.

The dragon was the sort of monster that would send me running if I saw it from afar. Just the sound of its footsteps told me it was way out of my league. The three humans, including Myria, were on the ground by its giant feet. They were all bleeding.

I forced my focus off Myria and back to the rocky dragon. I had to check its status. Then maybe I could figure out a way to deal with it.

Species: Little Rock Dragon

Status: Paralyzed (Slight)

Lv: 14/55

HP: 197/212

MP: 45/87

Attack: 168

Defense: 224

Magic: 82

Agility: 46

Rank: C

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 3

Breath Boost: Lv 1

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 1

Earth Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Fire Resistance: Lv 5

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Sand Breath: Lv 4

Bite: Lv 3

Stone Claws: Lv 3

Regenerate: Lv 2

Tremor: Lv 4

Stone Breath: Lv 6

Dragon Tail: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Final Evolution: Lv —

Before, I hadn't been able to get a clear look at an enemy's stats from a distance. Maybe it was because my View Status skill had been too low. But now I could see the dragon's stats clearly.

It was five times bigger than me, and its stats were triple mine.

Just making eye contact sent a wave of fear washing over me. I was trembling. I couldn't believe I actually thought the four of us could beat this thing.

Blood streaked the dragon's rugged body, but I doubted it was its own. I didn't see any injuries. Its defense was probably too high for attacks to hit at all.

So this was a Little Rock Dragon, huh? I couldn't even imagine what a fully grown Rock Dragon must look like.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

Its roar was incredibly deep and low, with enough resonance to make the entire forest tremble. Silence hung heavily, threaded with a panicked tension. Even the insects must have all fled when they heard those fierce roars. I wished I could do the same.

Ru

n.

You must.

Run. Run. It's.

no.

use.

The Divine Voice flickered in and out of my mind. My brain felt like it was vibrating. It was nauseating.

There was nothing I could do. I had absolutely no skills that could defeat this thing. The best attack I had was Dragon Punch, but it wouldn't work against this dragon's stats. I didn't even have to try it to know that.

A cruel hopelessness opened up inside me. The numbers didn't lie. There was no way I could win. In my estimation, I'd have to land thirty Dragon Punches with perfect accuracy right on the dragon's head to even have a chance to defeat it. That was how different our stats were. And that was assuming that each punch was full power *and* that the dragon didn't use its Regeneration skill. Most likely I couldn't even reach its head, it was so much bigger than me. And I didn't have the MP necessary to use thirty Dragon Punches, anyway. The chances of me winning were flat-out zero.

To make matters worse, my only allies were currently passed out cold. I'd checked their statuses so I knew they weren't dead, but all of their conditions showed Unconscious and Bleeding. Myria, who had protected me and smiled at me so kindly, was bleeding out on the ground with her eyes closed.

But the Little Rock Dragon was slow. Maybe I could charge in, land a single punch, and then drag the three humans away. I could save them.

That was my only hope. It was the signature move I'd developed when I was still an egg; my one and only tactic that combined my speed with my attack power and helped me kill my first darkwurm.

I charged in, kicking off the ground. I still had the Roll ability. I pulled in my arms and legs to form a little ball as I spun, channeling my old egg form.

Seeing me approach, the Little Rock Dragon raised its craggy tail in readiness to thwart my attack. The rough, jagged whip swung in preparing to crush me with mass alone. I zigzagged from right to left, magnificently evading its tail. The earth split behind me, making an awful sound, but I ignored it. I had to.

Right now, all my focus had to be on the Little Rock Dragon's movements. It lifted its massive front leg, intending to crush me. I dodged out of the way. The tail swished towards me. I dodged it. Again and again, I just kept dodging it. I focused all of my energy into evasion as I searched for a weak spot.

The Little Rock Dragon thrust its long neck towards me, opening its mouth wide.

Here comes the Bite attack!

I'd seen it on its Status Screen; I knew it'd try to use it eventually. I was waiting for this moment when it stretched its neck out close to me.

I jumped up as high as I could, evading the attack by a paper-thin margin.

Gained Title Skill "King of Evasion" Lv 1.

Now!

I tackled its stony face with all my strength. It threw me off, the force of it almost knocking me out of Roll. I somehow managed to keep moving, scrambling away from its head.

Please, it has to work. *C'mon and chase me! Come after me!*

The malice wafting off it was overwhelming.



Suddenly the ground began to rumble. Or at least, that's what it felt like to me. The landscape trembled and shook, kicking dust up into the air. A tree right in front of me broke off at the roots and fell towards me. It hit me hard, breaking my Roll skill and slamming me to the ground.

What was that? My head swam but I forced myself to think through it. It had to be the dragon's Tremor skill. The Little Rock Dragon had used its gigantic body to stomp on the earth to make it shake.

If I was in this state, there was no way the other three were safe. They were much closer to the dragon than I was. My only comfort was that since Tremor seemed to have such a wide area of effect, its power might've been dispersed enough to not do too much damage.

The Little Rock Dragon began its slow walk to where I lay crumpled on the ground.

Come on, come on!

I tried to get up. God, my body felt heavy. The dragon's guard was down; this was my chance. I'd lie still for now and pretend I couldn't move.

The Little Rock Dragon came up beside me, big mouth open, right in my face. Then I sprang up and blasted a Dragon Punch with all my might, hitting it right in the teeth.

Its fangs scraped my fist and I felt the skin break, but I landed the punch nonetheless. The inside of its mouth was vulnerable, one of the few places it didn't have that rocky hide.

"Raaaaaaaaaar!"

I retreated as the Little Rock Dragon let out a fearsome roar, its neck swinging around wildly in pain.

I did that.

That must have hurt, but it definitely wasn't a victory. I couldn't hope for a victory. My attack hadn't knocked much HP off at all.

I ran for the nearest human—the old man. I checked his status. His HP was at 0. Not great, but I needed to check the others, too. I found Doz next. The Little

Rock Dragon's claws had gotten him; his armor was ripped apart across the chest, wounds oozing blood. His legs were pinned by a branch that must have fallen during the Tremor attack.

I tried to shift the branch, but it was too heavy for me to lift by myself.

Tssss...

A hiss like steam behind made me turn around. Smoke billowed from the Little Rock Dragon's mouth. I instinctively knew that it was using its Regeneration skill, already undoing the little damage that I'd risked my life to inflict.

This was ridiculous. The dragon was way too strong.

I used Roll to speed towards Myria, who was still unconscious some distance away. I had some trouble finding her. The Tremor attack had left the ground uneven, and she'd slid partially into a depression in the dirt. As gently as I could, I took her neck in my jaws and pulled her out. She was slightly bigger than me, but I managed to sling her over my back.

Then I ran as fast as I could. I ran and I ran, the forest flashing by around me. I heard a crushing sound from behind that did not bode well for the other two humans. But I didn't turn around.

PART 4

I RAN THROUGH THE FOREST with Myria on my back. The Little Rock Dragon didn't follow us, but the graywolves must have been drawn in by the scent of her blood. They had us in their sights. A group of at least three. I could win if I took them head-on, but I wasn't sure I could protect Myria at the same time.

The graywolves weren't showing themselves, but I could hear them faintly. They seemed to be biding their time. I hoped they were considering withdrawing at the sight of my Stats, but it was also possible they were waiting for reinforcements, or trailing me in separate groups. Graywolves were very skilled at sniffing out others of their kind to form hunting packs. According to Divine Voice, it was a common strategy.

Well, if they weren't going to attack until later, that was a problem for later. I'd just proceed like they planned to leave us alone. I didn't really have a choice; I couldn't take them all on my own, and Myria's HP was dwindling by the minute.

At first I thought it was just my imagination, brought on by worry and my anxious, constant checking of her status. But I was right—her HP was draining constantly. It had to be a status condition. Bleeding. And at this rate, she wouldn't last five more minutes.

I thought I'd grown strong hunting those low-rank monsters, but in the grand scheme of things, I was weak. Worthless. After all those days of loneliness, I'd finally started to make a friend. But I couldn't even protect her.

"Raaaa!"

A Baby Dragon's roar. Maybe it wasn't the sort of sound to strike fear in the hearts of all the local monsters like the Little Rock Dragon's roar. Maybe it would just call my enemies closer, seeking easy prey. But I couldn't help myself. I had to roar. It was the only way to ease all the terrible, pent-up feelings that were swirling inside of me.

I wanted to be stronger. I wanted to be able to crush that ugly Rock Dragon

like it was a lowly wyrm.

The more I ran, the more of Myria's warm blood I felt running down my body, her life draining away with it.

"Raaaaaa!"

I roared again, a reckless call for help. But the only response I received was the fierce cries of monsters stronger than me, and the echo of my own pathetic little voice.

Gained Title Skill "Protective Spirit" Lv 1.

Wow, Divine Voice, how thoughtful! Not like I can actually do anything with that!

Hold on. Title Skills must have *some* kind of effect. Walking Egg kept giving me experience points. It was called a Skill, so it must have an ability attached. So maybe I *could* do something with it.

Hey, Divine Voice! Are you listening to me?!

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 2 is unable to provide that explanation.

Come on, don't mess around! Someone's life is on the line!

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 2 is unable to provide that explanation.

You've gotta be kidding me! You're the one who kept forcing those messages into my head saying "Get stronger" and "Run"! Listen, I don't know who you are, but I've got a feeling you're not as neutral as you pretend to be. You've been watching and ridiculing me this whole time! So suck it up and answer me! There's no time left!

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 2 is unable to provide that explanation.

The same answer over and over again. That feeling of throwing a ball against a wall returned, repetitive and futile, every word mysterious and inscrutable.

The Divine Voice was useless, so what should I do? How could I save Myria? I racked my brain, poring over every detail of this system controlling me.

I had an idea.

When I pushed hard to understand what the humans were saying, I gained a

special skill called Grecian Language. I had that skill now, but I hadn't made any progress with it beyond that. I couldn't use the language.

I'd been thinking about the system all wrong. Every time a new skill appeared, I wasn't gaining a new ability I could use. Instead, the skills reflected things I could already do. The world wasn't bound to the numbers; my Status Screen or whatever it was didn't create reality or make things happen. It just *read* the state of the world and put it in a numerical form. I was sure there were still elements I didn't understand; this was only a theory, after all. But it made a whole lot more sense than the alternative.

In other words, skills didn't just miraculously appear out of nowhere. Instead, skills were expressions of physical feats and capabilities. So if I practiced and worked at it, I should be able to use recovery magic. I could even do it now, however crude and low-level.

I lowered Myria off my back and lay her gently on the ground. I thought back to when she used magic on me—the light, the warmth, the sensation. According to her Status Screen, her recovery magic was called Rest.

I focused on the word “Rest” in my mind, trying to visualize the effects of the spell, and shouted it in my head.

Rest, Rest.

It's not working. Nothing's happening.

Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest!

Something was happening...

Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest!

A sudden, intense fatigue swept through my brain.

Fatigue? Just from thinking about something? If my MP was draining, did that mean the magic was working?

Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest!

Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest!

Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest!

Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest! Rest!

After repeating it dozens of times, a light appeared, healing Myria's wounds just the slightest bit. *I did it!*

I kept repeating Rest for as long as my stamina held out. I started panting, and I could feel my limit approaching. Checking my status, I saw that my MP had dropped to 0. I checked Myria's. Her HP was just a little higher than it had been.

That's it? I used up all my MP and that's all it did? Well, at least the negative status effect Bleeding disappeared. She should survive now.

Title Skill "Protective Spirit" Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

I don't care about title skills, just give me the Rest ability!

My spell only had about a fifth of the power that Myria's did, but at least she wouldn't bleed to death now. Still, Myria's low HP made me nervous. I needed to take her somewhere safe. My only choice was to leave the forest and search for the humans' village.

When Myria and the others had found me, their HP and MP were fine, and they hadn't seemed tired. That must mean their village was nearby. I searched for signs of where they'd come from as best I could and ran as fast as my legs could move in that direction.

PART 5

TWO GRAYWOLVES were following me. They'd finally shown themselves, clearly choosing a fight over retreat. They must have spent a while observing me and decided they stood a good chance. They closed in and then retreated, over and over, staying just out of range.

One was Lv 7, the other Lv 8. I could take the two of them with no problems, even with Myria on my back. If any others came to join in on the fun, though...

I knew it. Those two were just decoys. The pack had purposefully sent the two smallest wolves to draw my attention. They would wait for me to take the bait, and as soon as I slowed my pace to attack, the three hiding nearby would charge. The graywolves' standard tactic.

Normally, I could take on five of them easily. I was totally confident that I could destroy an entire pack of graywolves.

But I had Myria on my back. My only choice was to run.

Argh! Stop following me, you stupid stalker wolves!

I sped up, hoping to shake them, but they were stubborn.

I didn't have much stamina left. Not after a high-level dragon handed me my ass and I taught myself recovery magic by brute force, using it until my MP was completely drained.

I sighed—normally, losing them would be easy. But I pushed that thought out of my mind—I wasn't going to accomplish anything by whining about it.

"Gaaaaaaar!"

"Grrrrrrr!"

"Gaarooooo!"

"Arooooo!"

"Garoooo!"

The wolves began to howl. They must have realized I wasn't taking the bait, or maybe they'd noticed my injured state. They gave up on their ambush and

sprinted towards me all together, their leader in front. There were five of them, just as I'd suspected.

The vanguards were Lv 7 and Lv 8. Fine. I could defeat them with little to no damage.

The two flanking the head wolf were Lv 10 and Lv 11. In peak condition, I could take them down easily. Even now, they probably couldn't beat me, but they'd wear me down enough that other monsters could take advantage and pick me off.

The final wolf was the real problem. It was Lv 15. I'd never seen such a high-level graywolf before. Even if my stats were at full power, I would have made a tactical retreat before fighting it. Near the point of collapse, I knew I was in trouble. This was not a fight I wanted to have.

Just leave me alone!

I ran as fast as I could, but they were closing in. The head wolf could really move. Its agility was on par with mine, and it had a title skill called Forest Hunter. It was probably a big shot in the wolf world.

Fortunately, there was quite a gap between it and the smaller wolves. It was a risk, but if I could get the head wolf alone, I thought I might be able to take it on while still protecting Myria. If I just picked off the little ones, the leader would fly into a rage, but if I got rid of the leader, the others would run away. If I couldn't outrun them, that would have to be my strategy.

I wanted to give myself an edge with my Breath attack, but I didn't have any MP. It would have to be hand-to-hand combat.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about protecting Myria. I couldn't outrun the wolves, so putting off a fight now would only delay the inevitable. I needed to attack.

The Little Rock Dragon had let me off comparatively easily, but I was pretty confident in saying I hadn't yet been in a situation this dire.

I sped up, trying to build up some distance between the leader of the pack and the other wolves. I needed it alone to have half a chance. I held out hope that I could still lose them, but no luck. Fine. I expected that.

Slowing abruptly, I leapt up onto a nearby tree branch, digging in my claws to redirect my momentum. There was the pack leader, temporarily bewildered by my sudden leap into the trees. I used that split-second of confusion to my advantage, jumping from the branch and right onto the wolf's head.

"Gaaaaoooo!"

I bit into the back of its vulnerable neck with as much force as I could muster.

The other wolves ran up. I snarled and pushed the leader away, maneuvering myself into a turn without losing momentum. And then I started running again.

Everything went according to plan, save for one little detail.

"Grrrrrrrrr!"

The head wolf wasn't dead.

If I'd stuck around to finish the job, I would've been wide open for the little wolves' counterattack. I missed my shot. My exhaustion must have weakened my attack.

God, I hadn't even knocked it unconscious. It was awake and spitting with rage, springing to its feet and glaring at me with crimson eyes. The little wolves circled their leader worriedly, but it just knocked them away and came at me even faster than before.

Its claws tore at the ground as it completely ignored its draining stamina and charged me, faster and faster. It still had more than a fourth of its HP left, and the status condition Fury.

I sprinted to put distance between us, but it kept up easily.

What should I do? Should I attack again?

Up until now, I'd had the advantage of pretending to run away. If I turned to fight, there was no guarantee that I could get the first strike. Plus, the wolf was in Fury mode, making its movements erratic and unpredictable.

Even one hit would be bad, for me and for Myria. Neither of us had HP to spare. If only I had enough MP for Baby's Breath... But there was no sense in bellyaching.

I was worse off than I was when the fight started, but I still had to do something. One more attack. Come on. One more, and I was sure I could kill it.

I shot a quick glance behind me at the head wolf. Then I returned my focus forward, trying to map out the lay of the land and running the simulation. Judging by the terrain, the position of the trees... Yeah, I could do it again. The same trick. I could defeat the wolf.

I leapt into a tree, using my hind legs to maneuver in the air. But Myria's weight on my back messed with my center of gravity and I lost my balance, pitching backwards. *Not good, not good!*

"Gaaaaaaaao!"

The wolf came at me with an angled claw attack, digging into my chest and tearing all the way down towards my belly.

I almost dropped Myria, but I shook my hips and hitched her back into position. Another attack came, punishment for taking my attention off the enemy.

The wolf brandished its other claw.

"Grrrrrrr!"

I thrust my shoulder forward to take the brunt, but the gash was deep.

The second-fastest wolf caught up to us, flanking me from behind. It charged, attacking from my blind spot. Luckily, it missed Myria. But it didn't miss my stomach, which took severe damage.

I couldn't waste any more time. And now it was impossible for me to fight with Myria on my back.

I threw her off onto the ground. The impact would be rough on her in the state she was in, but I needed the freedom of movement.

Now that I was lighter, I evaded the attacks that came at me from the front, punching the pack leader in the nose as hard as I could. He slammed to the ground, skidding over the forest floor and collapsing. I checked to make sure his HP was zero. Yep. Down for good.

Gained 60 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 60 Experience Points.

“Baby Dragon” Lv 20 has become Lv 22.

Haah, haah... That was rough. Why couldn't my HP fully recover after I leveled up, like a video game? This world sucked.

I wanted to give Divine Voice the finger, but I couldn't lift my arm.

“Gaaaaaaaoo!”

One of the smaller wolves pounced on me from behind and bit into my shoulder. I shook it off and kicked it away, picking Myria up and putting her on my back again. Then I took off running.

They should have gotten scared and fled after I defeated their leader. But either they could sense how weak I was, or they were underestimating me after getting a good bite in. Whatever the case, they still followed.

The world faded in and out. My head hurt, my wounds throbbed, and my HP was so low. The bite on my shoulder stung. My legs grew heavier and heavier.

“Grrrrr!”

The closest wolf swiped its claws towards my back. I twisted to protect Myria from the blow, taking it myself. I couldn't endure this for long. For a split second, it felt like I was on the edge of unconsciousness. And my enemies weren't kind enough to overlook the opening I'd just given them.

From behind me came the sound of rending flesh.

Was I dead?

Strangely, there was no pain. Maybe that's what death felt like. But I could still move. And what was that I felt on my back? I shook my head, trying to think straight. And then I realized what had happened. It wasn't my flesh that split open. It was Myria's.

Her HP was even lower, and she had the negative status effect Bleeding again. I'd worked so hard to save her life, and now it was in danger again.

My mind went completely blank. I howled. The remaining four wolves must have sensed my rage, because they cowered and backed away.

Status Condition: Fury.

PART 6

AWARENESS SLOWLY CAME back to me. My body felt heavy and I hurt all over. I looked down at myself and my many, many wounds.

I didn't want to do anything about them. I just wanted to lie on this cool forest floor and sleep, even if it meant I slept forever.

No...I couldn't lose to the pain. *I have to figure out what's going on...that's my only hope.*

What happened to me? And Myria...where was Myria?

I lifted my head and saw a graywolf. And that was when I knew I had lost. I'd hoped that when I got up, the wolves would be gone and Myria would be safe. But that hope was in vain.

So you won? Fine, do whatever you want. I can't even stand. Just hurry up and kill me.

“ ”

I don't know what sound the wolf made in response; I doubted I was even fully conscious. But it didn't kill me. It just rushed into the forest and disappeared, like a scared little puppy with its tail between its legs.

Huh?

There was something strange in my mouth—I'd felt it since I woke up. Was I holding something with my teeth? With a huge effort, I opened my jaws, and the thing that was in my mouth fell onto the ground. It was a graywolf, covered in blood, its neck broken. I'd crushed it.

Gained 44 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 44 Experience Points.

Baby Dragon Lv 22 has become Lv 23.

Ooh...I'm getting close to evolving.

With considerable effort, I managed to lift my head and look around. The bodies of two graywolves lay beside me.

They're dead... Was I the one who killed them?

It had to be, considering how fast I leveled up. I must have lost it and run completely wild. It sounded nuts, but that was the only explanation.

But what about Myria? Where was she?

Myria? Myria? Ah...

I spotted her lying on the ground and ran to her. She was alive. She was still alive! She was bleeding and her HP was low, but she was *still alive*. I had to hurry.

I put her on my back and dragged my beat-up body to its feet. I ran.

At last, I made my way out of the forest and across a stretch of land covered in mounds of dirt in neat rows. Crops...? That must mean the human village was nearby. I made it in time.

I didn't have time to go around. Guiltily, I ran right through the field, trampling the crops in my way. I thought they might be vegetables, but my vision was hazy so I couldn't be sure. Hopefully I would be forgiven.

With every step I took toward the first row of houses, I felt the strangest illusion that I was getting lighter with every step. And finally, I made it. I staggered into the village. It was late enough that no one was on the street. Myria wouldn't last much longer; she needed treatment immediately. She'd die if I spent too much time searching for someone.

"Raaaaaaaaaar!"

I stood right in the middle of the village and let out a loud roar.

"Somebody save Myria! Wake up and get out here!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

"Hurry up or Myria will die!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

Somebody, anybody! Please, someone listen to me!

I roared over and over again, frantic. Finally, a door creaked open behind me.

Thank goodness! Myria is saved.

I was on the verge of death myself. I had to hope that delivering Myria home would gain their trust or, at the very least, they'd leave me alone and let me rest. Heck, if they liked me enough I could finally leave forest life behind and live right here in the village. I already had Grecian Language Lv 1. If someone could teach me, I was sure eventually I'd be able to communicate with ease.

I could go out hunting with the humans. I was strong, I could help out in the fields and they'd realize how useful I was to have around. And could repay them for trampling their crops.

The door opened slowly, cautiously, and a man peered at me through the crack. As soon as we made eye contact, he moved.

“Τέρας!”

A sear of pain ripped through my shoulder. What the heck? I looked down towards the source of the pain. An arrow protruded from deep within my flesh.

The man emerged from the house, expression fierce, bow at the ready. Idiotically, it took me a moment to realize the truth—he shot me. His jaw was clenched and his legs trembled.

Th-that's right...how could I have forgotten? I'm a dragon.

How else would a villager react to a dragon carrying a blood-covered human into town in the middle of the night? Of course they'd attack.

The man and I stared at each other. Then, weakly, he put down his bow and slumped to his knees. Hopelessness tinged his eyes as he sat face to face with a monster. He must have seen what little effect the arrow had, and figured he was a goner.

I checked his status. Much like Myria, he had very few skills. I was sure he knew better than anyone that he couldn't beat a monster.

I set Myria down on the ground, and then hurried out of the village.

I'm sure someone will help her now. This is for the best. I have no choice.

I couldn't think about that right now. I had to tend to my own wounds.

Title Skill “Protective Spirit” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Gained Title Skill “Itty-bitty Hero” Lv 1.

Interlude:

The Girl's Story

WHEN I WOKE, I found I was no longer in the forest, but in a soft bed.

I was wearing different clothes from before, and for a moment I thought it was all a dream. But no, my arm was bandaged. I suffered that injury when the Little Rock Dragon hit me with its Breath attack.

“You awake?”

I searched for the source of the voice and saw a pretty orange braid. Marielle stood beside my bed. She was the only proper White Mage we had in the village, and my mentor. She was quite old, but looked even younger than I did. I'd been told it was due to her having Elven blood, which slowed down the aging process.

Marielle fidgeted with her braid and gave me a quick, relieved smile, before her mouth tightened and she glared. Her expressions were so much like a child's that I sometimes doubted she was really as old as she said she was.

“Honestly, what were you thinking? How many times have I told you not to let Doz egg you on?”

Marielle's scolding reminded me, and I tried to sit up.

“Wh-what happened to Doz and Grantz?!”

Marielle poked me in the forehead with her index finger, trying to settle me down.

“Grantz...is dead. They found his body in the forest. I can't believe you idiots, trying to take on a Rock Dragon!”

“Grantz is...! But what about Doz?”

“They haven't found his body yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if the dragon ate him whole.”

I was the only one who survived.

I should have tried harder to stop them. Everyone in the village knew that the Rock Dragon was the strongest monster in the forest.

A sigh escaped Marielle's lips as she watched me cry. Then she placed a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm glad that you survived, Myria."

I held my head in my hands and slowly told her everything that happened.

Doz was the most powerful warrior in the village. He could be frightening and quick to anger, but he was the one people relied on to chase off the monsters that stalked the edge of town. So even if he wasn't liked, he was trusted.

Then, a few years back, he set his sights on a Rock Dragon. He didn't stand a chance. He abandoned his comrades and fled. He lost the fight, and with it his good standing with the people.

His abrasive personality had already made him unpopular, but after his failure, the ill will only grew stronger. Still, his strength and combat contributions to the village were such that few people had the courage to actually speak out against him.

Then, just the other day, a traveler had arrived in the village calling himself a swordsman. "I am penniless," he'd said. "But I have the meat and hides from monsters I've hunted in the forest. I will trade them in exchange for food and a warm bed."

Among his spoils was Rock Dragon meat. We figured that meant this stranger had defeated the beast on his own. Whispers spread of the traveler's success until Doz picked a fight with the man at the local tavern.

Doz boasted to everyone within earshot, saying, "I'm strong enough to defeat it now!" He tried to recruit Marielle, who could use recovery magic, and Grantz, a drifter, to accompany him on his quest of revenge. Marielle refused, so Doz set his sights on her apprentice. Me.

I didn't want to go, but he said, "I'm going whether you come or not. And if Grantz and I go alone, we could die." It was as good as blackmail. I could tell that Grantz didn't want to go either, but he hid it. He was an outsider, and I imagine it was hard to say no to Doz, who had influence, even if he wasn't liked.

Doz was adept at using a person's weaknesses against them.

So we set off into the forest and found ourselves a fairly small Rock Dragon. But we still didn't stand a chance. And now only I was alive. Had it let me go? No, that wasn't right. Someone saved me, I remembered faintly.

"Marielle, who saved me?"

"Saved you? You mean Aurus? He saw the monster dragging you through the village and got his bow—"

"No, no. I mean the person who carried me out of the forest."

"No one else went into the forest that night. And I doubt a passerby would have brought you all the way into the village and left without so much as a word. Are you sure you didn't run away on your own?"

Marielle didn't seem to think it was possible I'd been saved. I mean, it didn't *sound* possible. But I definitely remembered someone carrying me on their back, frantically running away from a pack of monsters...

But was it really a person at all?

"You sure it wasn't just a dream?" Marielle asked.

"I'm sure! There's no way I could've gotten back here all by myself."

"I think you're still confused, Myria. Just wait a minute and I'll go warm up some chicken soup I made this morning. Once you have some food in your belly, we can talk."

"But I'm certain..."

I tried to focus on the memory of someone carrying me, of them using recovery magic on me. It was weak, barely at a beginner's level, but I remembered how warm it felt. Then the faint memories of my savior's hands, legs, and body came back to me...

"What if it was that dragon...?" I murmured to myself as I looked out the window. But of course, that little dragon was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 3:

The Venomous Spider Taranturouge

PART 1

I AWOKE IN A damp, earthen space.

Yesterday, I returned to the forest after fleeing the village and took refuge in the trunk of a hollow tree, curling up to recover. The sunlight shone bright through the hole. I sat up, smacking my shoulder.

Oof, it's really cramped in here.

I made the attempt more slowly, trying to avoid knocking my head. I pushed my way out through the hollow, pulling myself along the ground. I stretched out my limbs, my foggy mind gradually becoming clearer.

After a good yawn, I checked my status, which had become something of a daily ritual in the morning. Taking care of one's health was very important. Best to check first thing for anything strange.

Species: Baby Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 23/25

HP: 41/78

MP: 40/72

Hmm, so I wasn't fully healed yet. Only about halfway there. I still felt sluggish, but if I wanted to eat, I had to hunt.

My HP was more important than my MP at the moment. I didn't need battle skills to fill my belly; if I spotted anything too dangerous, I'd just run. But I should raise my HP a bit in case of emergencies.

Rest!

I mentally shouted the spell name that hadn't even showed up on my status

screen yet. A faint light surrounded me and my MP dropped 8 points. I only regained 2 HP. Pathetic, but better than nothing. Maybe it would finally get recognized as a skill if I kept practicing. I repeated the Rest spell five more times.

Species: Baby Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 23/25

HP: 53/78

MP: 0/72

I gained 3 HP two out of the five times I cast the spell. That wasn't terrible, and if I practiced I'd surely get better. If I started when my MP was full, I could recover about 20 HP before my MP was totally drained. It wasn't efficient, but it wasn't entirely useless. My body no longer felt so sluggish.

Next order of business: find lunch.

I was so close to another evolution—I really wanted to max out my level today. I'd keep evolving until I got strong enough to snap that Little Rock Dragon's neck. After that, I'd be golden. It was the strongest monster I'd seen so far. Once I didn't have to worry about survival, I could go back to that village.

What if I only terrified them again? If I kept helping stray humans who came to the forest, maybe word would spread. And then *maybe...*

I walked along, completely lost in thought until I spotted a darkwurm trundling by. It spotted me, too. Took one glance, and ran like hell. Ah, the memories. Back in the day, I was the one running for my life.

Still, this was slightly weird. This was the first darkwurm I'd seen since the day I fought that big group. I figured I'd killed them all, so I didn't expect to see one again. I must have covered more ground when I was searching for the village than I realized.

I leapt into the air, cutting off the darkwyrms' escape. Then I punched it right in the face.

"Ssshk!"

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

The video game message window popped up in my head to let me know the monster was dead. I put my hands together in silent thanks and then got down to it. I tore into its spine, scarfing down the meat.

Crruunch, crruunch.

I chuckled wryly to myself as I listened to the disgusting chewing sounds, thinking that I'd gotten pretty used to this life. Now that I was full, it was time to concentrate on leveling up. I needed to max out my level quickly so that I could evolve. I remembered the Divine Voice saying Baby Dragons had lots of evolution paths to choose from.

PART 2

SHORTLY AFTER MY MEAL, I came across another darkwurm. So there *were* more of them around here. Now I had an easy way to level up.

The darkwurm ran from me, so I followed it slowly down a narrow path, letting it corner itself between large rocks.

It realized it was trapped and opened its mouth wide, lunging towards me in desperation. I dodged its Bite attack and delivered a light punch to the side of its head. It recoiled and I grabbed hold of its tail and lifted it up, swinging it through the air.

“Ssshhk! Ssshhk!”

Now the only thing the darkwurm could do was scream. It frantically shook its head, trying to bite me, but there was no way it could reach.

Ow! I guess it did bite me a little...

Title Skill “Klutz” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Oh, yeah. I forgot I had that skill. Not really sure of the criteria for leveling that one up. *Well, whatever. Who cares about a stupid skill?*

I wasn't keeping the darkwurm alive to torture it. I wanted to make it use its Call Allies skill. I felt bad distressing it like this, but if the darkwurm truly felt it had no other option, it would eventually bring the other darkwurms to me. That was much more efficient than traipsing around the forest all day looking for monsters. After all, it was a swarm of darkwurms that had helped me get from Lv 1 to Lv 15 all at once.

“Gggchhkkkk! Gggchhkkkk!”

After swinging the darkwurm around in midair for about five minutes, I realized I was being watched from all sides. I turned to greet the horde of darkwurms, enraged at seeing their comrade tossed around in midair. Every last one of them had the Fury status condition.

Just as I planned. *Sorry, but you guys are a necessary sacrifice.* I cut through the mountain of charging darkwurms, tearing them apart. *Take that!*

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

And that!

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

Oof!

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Pest Killer” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

I wasn't sure of my kill count, but before I knew it, there wasn't a single darkwurm left standing. Their lifeless bodies lay strewn about, blood oozing sluggishly. So many laid out in a row was a rather grotesque sight, and I felt a little guilty.

Listen, darkwurms. You guys were heroes, trying to rescue your friend who was in trouble. I'll never forget your bravery, okay?

Baby Dragon Lv 24 has become Lv 25.

Baby Dragon has achieved MAX Lv.

Evolution Requirements have been fulfilled.

I was glad I'd maxed out my level, but...hell, there was just a bad taste in my mouth. My plan had been efficient, but I didn't want to use this tactic ever again.

Gained Title Skill “Wrongdoer” Lv 1.

Now you're just being mean. Whatever. Putting aside your terrible sense of humor, it's time to talk evolution.

If I evolved, I could take on enemies more easily, and it would lower the risk of a human killing me by mistake. It would give me time to convince them I wasn't a threat. Plus...I felt the most intense urge to get more powerful. Was it some kind of dragon instinct? Or was it because of the Divine Voice? It urged

me to get stronger over and over again.

Divine Voice, show me my evolution options!

Display Evolution Patterns?

Yes, that's literally what I just asked you.

Future:Mini Angel Dragon Rank CMini Dragon Rank C-Young Plague Dragon Rank D+Kid Marble Dragon Rank D+Kid Dragon Rank D

Present:Baby Dragon Rank D-

History:Dragon Egg Rank F

Wow. Looks like I've got a lot more options this time! Five instead of just two.

What was that weird one in the middle, Young Plague Dragon? I was a little overwhelmed with choice; I needed to listen to the explanations and weigh my options.

So there's "little," "kid," "baby," and "mini," but what's the difference between all of those? And "young," too. Do I just go off their rank? So it would be Baby > Kid > Young > Mini?

The adjectives refer to certain monsters' evolution patterns.

Is that really your answer? You're being vague again.

"Little" does not refer to evolution rank, but indicates maximum size of growth. Little types can raise their stats quickly; however, their number of possible evolutions and abilities are inferior to "Baby" types.

Okay. So let's leave the Little ones out of consideration. Although being able to advance quickly was probably a good advantage to have out here in the wild. Maybe that *was* actually what I wanted? I'd only made it this far thanks to the View Status skill and Myria's help. So far I'd been able to escape from strong

enemies, making up for how slowly I'd progressed.

"Kid" types are superior to "Baby" types.

"Mini" types do not have many evolution options. However, the options they do have are guaranteed to be reliable.

Hmm, okay.

Divine Voice went quiet before explaining the Young type. Well, it was probably a lot like the Kid type, anyway. I wasn't sure how much the Divine Voice could actually tell me. Maybe if I kept aggressively asking questions, it would level up.

Sometimes it went off the rails and started spamming text in my head. The sensation of something messing around in my brain was creepy, though it had been helpful in the past.

Regardless, I wanted to hear more about the Mini Angel Dragon, the Kid Marble Dragon, and the Young Plague Dragon.

Mini Angel Dragon: Rank C. Awakened by the skill Protective Spirit. A dragon which has sworn to dedicate its life to others. Can use a variety of White Magic, but its attack power is not very high.

Wait, so the Title Skills actually influenced my evolution options? Mini meant it was small, and I didn't love the idea of low attack power. But the White Magic...that meant recovery magic, right? Maybe that would help me make friends with the humans.

Kid Marble Dragon: Rank D+. A mutated dragon with a marbled pattern on its skin. Has higher MP than the average dragon.

Maybe that would be good in the long term? A mutated form made it sound like it was rare or valuable. That sweet, irresistible pull of a limited-edition item.

Young Plague Dragon. The first step towards becoming a wicked dragon that brings disaster wherever it goes. However, at this low level it has only strayed slightly from a virtuous path and can still turn back. Very intelligent. Can use its skill "Human Transformation" to visit human villages, but generally cannot do anything right.

Huh? Human Transformation?!

If I had that, I could turn myself into a human and visit the village. The whole thing sounded sinister, but the Divine Voice *did* say I could always turn back to the virtuous path. I could just learn that “Human Transformation” skill and then get back on the straight and narrow. I was sure that was the best option.

I did have reservations, though. For starters, the name freaked me out. I honestly had a bad feeling about the whole situation. But the promise of human transformation was just too tempting. I wanted it. I *really* wanted it. I needed to find out what happened to Myria after I left her.

This was the only way I’d be able to go to the village again. That settled it. I was going to evolve into the Young Plague Dragon.

The instant I made the decision, heat spread all through me. My small, chubby body began to elongate and thin out. The wings on my back grew larger.

My skin started to darken. I was hot, and my eyes were *really* hot. God, did I make a mistake? I suddenly saw the world from much higher up. Before, my body was around 120 centimeters long, but now I had to be two meters tall.

“Baby Dragon” has evolved into “Young Plague Dragon.”

Gained Special Skill “Fly” Lv 1.

Gained Special Skill “Dragon Scale Powder” Lv 1.

Gained Special Skill “Dark Type” Lv 1.

Special Skill “Dragon Scale” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Gained Resistance Skill “Dark Resistance” Lv 1.

Due to Title Skill “Dragon King’s Son” Lv —, all Resistance Skills less than Lv 5 have increased.

Okay, what was Dragon Scale Powder? I didn’t love that. It made it sound like I was just going to spread poison around everywhere.

Gained Normal Skill “Disease Breath” Lv 1.

Normal Skill “Lovebite” Lv 1 has become “Venom Fangs” Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill “Paralyzing Venom Claws” Lv 1.

No, no! I don’t want that! I definitely don’t need a skill like that! This isn’t just straying off the virtuous path, it’s diving off head first!!

Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Skills can now be researched in detail.

Okay, well, that one sounds pretty handy. Especially since I just gained a bunch of weird skills all at once.

Title Skill “Wrongdoer” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Gained Title Skill “Calamity” Lv 1.

Could I really come back from this? I needed to learn Human Transformation, but I had a feeling I was headed way down a terrible path. Well, whatever. I’d cross that bridge when I came to it.

.....

.....

What, that’s all? I’m not going to learn “Human Transformation”? Um, Divine Voice, did you trick me...

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/40

HP: 37/50

MP: 0/55

Attack: 47

Defense: 37

Magic: 44

Agility: 40

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 1

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Fall Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 3

Baby's Breath: Lv 2

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 3

Pest Killer: Lv 2

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 1

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 4

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 1

Wrongdoer: Lv 2

Calamity: Lv1

It's not there! I've checked over and over again but it's not there! You told me I could use "Human Transformation" but the skill isn't there! Hey, what's going on? Why the heck else would I evolve into a flying disaster unless I could use that skill? Are you listening to me?

Maybe I could only learn the skill if I leveled up more. That had to be it. Right? Can I really trust you, Divine Voice? Answer me! You're making me nervous. You know, trust is a really crucial foundation to a relationship. You haven't been lying to me, have you?

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

Agh! You're avoiding the question! I'll be able to learn "Human

Transformation” really soon, right? I just have to meet some kind of requirements...right?

PART 3

AT ANY RATE, I just needed to calm down. According to Divine Voice, I could now research my skills in more detail. I should start with the suspicious ones I gained when I evolved.

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 1

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Fall Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 2

View Status: Lv 3

Baby's Breath: Lv 2

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 3

Pest Killer: Lv 2

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 1

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 4

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 1

Wrongdoer: Lv 2

Calamity: Lv1

Hm. Nope, Human Transformation still wasn't there. Surely once I leveled up it would appear. Probably. Hopefully. I decided to ask about Dragon Scale first.

**Special Skill "Dragon Scale." Repels attack using tough dragon scales.
Reduces all forms of damage.**

Okay, so I'll use that when I want extra defense. Next is the Dragon Scale Powder.

Special Skill “Dragon Scale Powder.” Flapping wings spreads a noxious cloud which weakens all creatures besides Dragons. At Max Lv, powerful enough to travel through the atmosphere and wipe out entire countries.

Oh my god! Hang on a second, isn't this too overpowered? Why didn't you tell me about this before I evolved? I'm basically a biological weapon! How can I make friends with humans if I'm like this? If I were a human, I'd avoid me like the plague!

Well, if I didn't use it, it wouldn't level up. Would the noxious cloud be triggered automatically if I spread my wings? That meant I couldn't fly at all. Anyway—next. I was most curious about Divine Voice. Everything about it was suspicious. How was it forcing its way into my head?

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

Unsurprising. Divine Voice was useful, but sketchy. I didn't even want to level it up anymore, honestly.

The Resistance Skills seemed self-explanatory. Lv 1 was barely noticeable, but Lv MAX seemed close to immunity. And my Resistance Skills were leveling up across the board. Once they all got to MAX, I'd be close to invincible, no?

I could guess what the Normal Skills did, too...but there was one I was curious about. I doubted I'd ever use it, but I might as well ask for details.

Normal Skill “Disease Breath.” Breath attack that emits a noxious cloud of disease, infecting victims with severe abnormal status effects. The Evil Dragon Jabberwock used this skill 2,000 years ago to destroy Carroll, the happiest country in all recorded history.

Divine Voice, is this fun for you?! I'm on track to becoming the enemy of humanity, here! And you claimed this wasn't too far off the path of good! How am I supposed to turn back now? It's absolutely impossible!

If I were a human, there was no way I'd let a dangerous monster like me just roam about freely! This was a “band the whole world together to take down a threat” situation!

I absolutely made the wrong choice here. I take it back! Let me have a do-over!

I had a feeling I should've gone with the Mini Angel Dragon, but there wasn't anything I could do about it now. My actions seemed to influence how I grew, so I could just start racking up good deeds and everything should work out fine. I should check out the Title Skills, too. They were all pretty mysterious.

Title Skill "Dragon King's Son." Proof of belonging to the Dragon King's bloodline. Reduces number of Experience Points needed to advance. Certain basic Resistance Skills are easier to obtain. Increases levels of Resistance Skills below Lv 5 upon Evolution. Greatly influences Evolution options.

Okay, that totally sounded like cheating. Also, if I was the son of the Dragon King, why the heck was I just abandoned in the middle of the woods?! Where was my deadbeat dad? Why didn't he raise me in a castle like all the other Dragon King's sons? I'd never seen a Dragon King in the forest, that was for sure. This was child neglect!

Title Skill "Walking Egg." Proof of conscious thought prior to hatching. Wise, with a sharp memory. Receives bonus Experience Points after a battle.

So this egg skill wasn't going anywhere. My rapid advance made sense now, though. The Walking Egg/Dragon King Title Skill combo gave me a big experience boost. And here I'd been complaining about not leveling up fast enough. I'm sure people without those skills would be pretty annoyed to hear that! I was still annoyed myself, actually. I decided to check the Just an Idiot skill.

Title Skill "Just an Idiot." Not very clever. More susceptible to mental status effects. Affects evolution options.

Wait, I thought you said I'm wise and have a sharp memory?! Hey! Are you sure you're not enjoying jerking me around? Just come right out and call me stupid! Why even bother with these title skills! They're just pissing me off!

And Just an Idiot also affected my evolution options? I didn't love that. I wondered if I'd get an option to turn into a Useless Dragon, or something. I bet kids would throw rocks at me.

Title Skill: “Itty-bitty Hero.” Modest bravery. The kindness of a hero. Slightly increases damage dealt depending on the weapon used.

I couldn't remember exactly when I got this skill. I just...had it at some point. Did I even do anything heroic? Maybe if I leveled up this skill I could avoid becoming an Evil Dragon.

All right, next one. I already don't feel great about it.

Title Skill: “Wrongdoer.” An inhumane outlaw who laughs at the piles of corpses at his feet. Deals more damage with Dark Type attacks, but reduced resistance to Light Type attacks.

I wasn't expecting much, but wow—this was an absolutely worthless skill. I tried so hard to learn Rest, but now there didn't seem much chance of getting that skill recognized.

You tricked me into signing up for this! First I'm a hero, then you give me this nonsense?! Give me back my pure self! Jeez, this...well, fine. There's nothing I can do about it now. I'll just level up and change course next time. I'm gonna become the King of Heroes! Then no one will be able to call me an outlaw. Stop giving me this garbage. I don't want it to affect my evolution options!

PART 4

I DECIDED TO REST for the day and then walk the forest to level up. I didn't want to stray far. My first goal was to learn the Human Transformation skill and return to the village. It was back to hunting low-level graywolves, I guess. I could probably get up to at least Lv 40 doing that.

I wondered if there were any other weak monsters that gave lots of experience points. I knew that I had to pick opponents around the same level and rank as me if I didn't want progressing to take forever, but I couldn't keep risking my life fighting to the point of death like I had been or I'd end up dead for good.

If I only had about a fifty percent chance of victory against monsters of the same rank as me, then the odds that I would keep winning long enough to grow into a magnificent dragon were pretty slim.

In most games like these, you'd have high defense and still get crazy amounts of EXP, even with low attack power. Plus, there'd be bonus monsters that would shoot out money everywhere. That sounded great!

Since I just evolved I was back at Lv 1, so it would be safest to start out hunting small fry. I could start worrying about maximizing my efficiency after I leveled up a bit more.

Okay...all of a sudden I can't move.

I wasn't paralyzed; I could move my limbs, but it felt like something invisible was pinning me down. I checked, but there was nothing listed on my status conditions to explain it.

Suddenly a rustling sound came from above me, and a gigantic spider descended from a tree. It was the same size as me, its entire body a bright, vivid red. Baring its sharp crimson fangs, it stuck out a long, purplish-red tongue at me. This was unlike any spider I'd ever seen before. I realized the reason I couldn't move—I was stuck in its web. If I squinted hard I could just barely see thin white threads. I quickly checked the spider's status.

Species: Taranturouge

Status: Normal

Lv: 17/30

HP: 78/78

MP: 59/65

Attack: 88

Defense: 54

Magic: 74

Agility: 75

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Stealth: Lv 4

Poison Belt: Lv 2

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 1

Conceal: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 3

Spidersilk: Lv 4

Paralyzing Tongue: Lv 2

Double Poison: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Forest Assassin: Lv 4

Tenacious: Lv 3

Crap. It's way stronger than I am.

It was fine that my level reset after I evolved, I guess, but all my stats got weaker along with it. I'd planned to hunt a bunch of weak monsters and raise everything higher than it was before. Getting cornered by a D Rank monster was the last thing I wanted.

I may have underestimated this forest. I wasn't even close to strong enough to take on a huge spider like this. Its attack power alone put mine to shame. It was much faster than me, too. I'd made a huge tactical error. I'd figured I could always run away if a monster's stats were too good, but that didn't work if I was ambushed and stuck.

Next time I evolved I'd crucify the first darkwurm I saw to make it call its allies right away. Surely that was the best way to level up when all my stats were low. I'd feel a little guilty about it, but my life was at stake. Even if wholesale slaughter would gain me another sketchy title.

The taranturouge licked its chops. It was so confident it was going to eat me. It was pretty irritating, actually. Sticky, dark purple liquid dripped out of its mouth.

If something this strong pounces on me, I'm done. I gotta do something about this web, or else I won't even be able to fight back and it'll eat me up. Don't I have any skills at all to get me outta this mess?!

But how was I supposed to use any of my skills since I couldn't move my arms or legs?

Oh, wait. What about...Baby's Breath.

If I could blow a gust of hot wind, I might be able to set the web on fire. If I got a little burnt, I'd just have to deal with it. Yeah, I could burn the web, but then what? Should I run or fight? I needed to be realistic. With the huge difference in our stats, it would be a super tough fight.

So maybe I should use something else. Baby's Breath would just be a temporary measure. If I couldn't beat the spider, I probably couldn't run away from it, either—its agility was much higher than mine. I needed to stop and actually make a plan. If I made a rash decision, it would eat me in seconds. But the taranturouge was taking its time, seeming confident that it had already beaten me. There was no reason for me to rush.

I gave the taranturouge an arrogant, assessing glance. I wanted to make it clear that I still had some fight left in me.

"Raaaaaaaaaar!"

I roared and flapped my arms. I kicked up my legs, slicing through the air with my claws. If my strategy failed, the spider would kill me. I'd maybe be able to land one good punch and then *bam!* taranturouge chow.

But I figured if the spider saw me flailing and decided to take a safer approach, I might be able to escape. I couldn't read its expression at all, but I could've sworn that for a split second I saw it smiling, like it was enjoying watching me struggle for my life.

It's not working? Maybe I should just bust out Baby's Breath right now. But just as I started to draw air into my lungs, the taranturouge turned its back to me. I'd never been so relieved to see a spider butt in my life. My plan had worked.

Then the taranturouge shot out its thread. A regular-sized bug I could have handled, but a *giant* spider spraying web at me was, well...something else. And realizing that *stuff* was now stuck to my body... *Oh my god, this is disgusting!*

But my plan worked—all that struggling just made it want to immobilize me, not attack. Perfect. Not only was this joker mooning a guy fighting for his life, it was also spraying out highly flammable material? It was practically begging to be burned alive.

I opened my mouth wide and blew a gust of air onto the thread. *There, take my Baby's Breath!* It was so hot the air shimmered, the white spider thread turning red as it caught fire.

The flames traveled up the web, right up to the taranturouge's vulnerable

behind. A beat later, my fiery breath engulfed its crimson body.

“Eegghh!”

The taranturouge let out an indescribable shriek, reduced to a ball of flames with its rear still facing me before it collapsed on the spot.

Wow, hot! I mean, of course fire breath was hot, and it was necessary to destroy the spider web, but *man!* I needed to be careful or I’d die, too! The thread was still wrapped around me, and I was starting to burn up—flames licked me all over. Stupid! I should’ve tried something else—oww!

Gained Resistance Skill: “Fire Resistance” Lv 1.

Okay, I think it’s a little better now.

The fire worked better against the spider than I was expecting. Its entire body was covered in flames, after all.

Species: Taranturouge

Status: Burned

Lv: 17/30

HP: 62/78

MP: 56/65

Are you kidding? *16 measly HP?* I’d caught it off guard *and* landed a direct hit—I was expecting way more damage than that! I guess my stats were just too low to make more of a dent.

Well, no use whining. I knew from the beginning that I didn’t have a chance of actually beating it. I figured I’d land one punch while it was down and then get the heck out of here. I pounced onto the taranturouge’s back. It was still curled up stiff. I used my new Paralyzing Venom Claws skill, digging them into its flesh.

Don’t you dare underestimate a dragon!!

Slice! Slash!

“Eeugh!”

Fluid spilled from the taranturouge’s charred body. I dove in headfirst, tearing into the worst of the burns with my fangs.

“Hsst!”

All right, time for another status check.

Species: Taranturouge

Status: Burned Paralyzed (Slight) Fury

Lv: 17/30

HP: 42/78

MP: 56/65

Jeez, how many status conditions could one spider have? I was glad it was slightly paralyzed, but Fury worried me. So did the fact that I’d given it all I had, but hadn’t even whittled away half of its HP. This wasn’t good. So much for thinking I had a chance at killing this thing.

It had Automatic HP Recovery, so I needed to run. There was no sense dragging this out any longer than I had to. The difference in our stats meant I had no hope of victory. Once it recovered its health, the situation would be even worse. That Automatic HP Recovery skill was *way* too handy. I *really* wanted it, especially now that I was covered in terrible self-inflicted burns.

The spider could recover just by lying there for a little while, but if I took a big hit, my only recourse was to sleep away the entire day. How was that fair, huh?

I prayed for the paralysis to hold out just a bit longer as I stepped over the taranturouge and ran away.

Don’t you dare come after me! Just lie there in pain for a while, okay?

PART 5

I RAN AND I RAN, spurred by the terrible sound of eight scuttling feet echoing behind me.

Dang it, the paralysis didn't last long at all! At least give me a head start!

I should've torn off one of its legs or something instead of just biting it on the back. I had the Fly skill from when I evolved into the Young Plague Dragon, but it was so low level that I could barely even float. I kept trying over and over again, wasting time and letting the spider get closer and closer. *Agh! No skills at all would be better than these worthless ones!*

I was always running away. But what else could I do against enemies this strong? The taranturouge was coming closer. I was running all out, but it was going to catch up to me at any moment. This was really, really bad—I had to think of something. If only some other monster would show up to take care of the spider instead.

I flipped into the air, curling into a ball to use my Roll skill. This was faster than running, if less controlled. I couldn't make any small, precise movements. The taranturouge's footsteps kept coming, but they didn't seem to be closing the distance for now. I could still shake it, maybe. Roll was a handy skill! The spider was already pretty worn down stamina-wise; it was probably running on fumes, and it would have to run out of gas soon. I had a feeling that if it used Automatic HP Recovery, all its status effects would disappear, including Fury. The pain from the burns had caused it in the first place, after all. So once it healed, its anger would disappear with the wounds.

But once I'd been rolling through the forest for about ten minutes, the taranturouge still showed no signs of slowing down. Actually, it seemed to be moving even faster than before. Or was I the one getting slower? What was this monster's deal, anyway? Where'd it get all that energy?

Normal Skill "Roll" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

There we go!

Roll got a little faster, although not by much. I'd been rolling so much, no

wonder it leveled up. *Okay, good timing! I've still got a chance of escaping this thing!*

Gained Title Skill “Chicken Runner” Lv 1.

Hey, I never said I was scared! If I had more of a chance of winning, I would've stayed and fought! This was strategic!

Still...that was an escape skill of some kind, right? Maybe it made me faster when I tried to run away. I could deal with the insulting name if it helped me now. After all, my life was on the line here. Even with an advantage, this was going to be tricky. I couldn't use Roll forever, after all. It was already getting rough. *Just give up on me already, Spider!*

Oh, no. *That's a cliff!*

I had Fall Resistance, but that was just for short distances. This was a legit drop. I bet there was a river with a super-fast current at the bottom of this cliff, like the kind that showed up in the final scene of an action movie. If I fell from here, I'd die for sure.

My only choice was to stop myself before I got to the edge. But even if I made it away from the cliff, I still had a giant spider on my case, and I was getting sick of this death race with the tarantula. It would get me eventually. Maybe I should just try to clear the cliff? It had to be ten meters to the other side, though. How could I make that work? If I had something to launch myself off, that would be different, but there wasn't anything around here that I could use. There obviously weren't any ramps just sitting around in nature—it'd be kinda scary in and of itself if there were.

I had Fly, but the sad hover I'd managed at my current level wouldn't get me far. And as soon as I stopped using my Roll skill, the spider would catch up to me. Huh...maybe I didn't have to turn it off, though?

I didn't stop. Instead, I kept racing right towards the cliff head-on. As I approached the edge, I leapt as high as I could and spread my wings, my body still curled into a little ball as I shot into the air.

Heck yeah, I caught the wind without losing any momentum! Man, that breeze feels great. So great I should try this again sometime soon. Heh, ten

meters is nothing! Now I finally get to say goodbye to that stupid spider. Maybe once I level up more I'll come back and pay it a visit.

As I reached the other side, I glided down and folded up my wings. Once I hit the ground, I slowed and stopped the Roll skill.

All right, I escaped! But I got your name and your stats, Spider! Once I level up enough to kick your butt, I'll be back! Don't you dare forget me!

I was exhausted. I'd planned to spend the day leveling up, but I gave up on that idea. It could wait until tomorrow.

Today I'd just hunt, eat a nice meal, and find a safe place to sleep. I must have pulled every muscle in my body, and all that rolling made me dizzy.

I turned back around towards the cliff for no particular reason. Maybe I heard a weird noise, or sensed something was off, but there wasn't anything there. Just the heat as the sunlight shone through the trees and onto my head.

I looked up at the sun hanging high in the sky, then slowly lowered my gaze.

And there it was. A giant spider spinning its web into a thin, makeshift bridge and coming straight towards me.

PART 6

IT WAS COMPLETELY unexpected. I mean, ten meters was so *far*. No one would think a spider's thread could reach that far, right? Guess this was what I got for underestimating spiders. I should have laid in wait and used Baby's Breath to burn the spidersilk bridge. But I totally thought I'd gotten away, so I'd let down my guard. Now it was too close. I was an idiot. A colossal idiot!

The taranturouge stuck out its long, slithery tongue, its eight legs deftly undulating as it crawled across the earth straight towards me. It was *still* chasing me? How was I even worth all this? What in the world did I do to make it hate me so much?! All I did was set its butt on fire a little! Talk about stubborn!

I turned, curling up to use Roll to escape again. What else was I supposed to do, if I couldn't run away from it? I jumped across a *cliff* and it was still coming after me. I wasn't exactly hopeful.

Wasn't there some way I could use Fly to, you know...actually fly? If fleeing wasn't realistic, I would need to figure out a way to kill it, or make it lose interest somehow. But no matter what my plan was, I needed to put some distance between us first. I picked up speed and rolled between the trees as fast as I could.

Okay, well. For some reason it felt like the spider was even faster than before. Had it just been going easy on me? Maybe when it saw me flying over the cliff it knew I was serious. If I let my guard down for even one instant, it would catch up.

Normal Skill "Roll" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Well, seemed like Roll had kept gaining experience. I completely understood why, but it was also kind of frustrating. I was going to smash into something if I kept rolling around at breakneck speed like this. All the precise control needed for Roll was starting to test my concentration.

Tree, tree, rocks, tree, tree, rocks...

Right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left...

I kept spinning along at a furious speed, just managing to glance behind me. The taranturouge was swinging its long tongue back and forth like a pendulum, spattering its spit in all directions. Its legs moved so swiftly that I could hear them rustling. How was it *still* chasing me? Maybe it was starting to like me or something.

Sorry, Mr. Spider, but you're just not my type! It's not you, it's me. This is so awkward, so please just go away now, seriously!

I turned my gaze forward—only to see a graywolf right up ahead. Oh, great. Now I'd really done it. It was so close I was afraid it would start chasing me, too.

Listen, I'm right at the limit of what I can handle right now.

Instead of slowing down to avoid it, maybe I should just accelerate and barrel right through? I was veering right, but I corrected back toward it. I hit it straight on and plowed it right into a tree.

Gained 20 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 20 Experience points.

"Young Plague Dragon" Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

Hitting the graywolf knocked me off course, and I compensated by veering back and decelerating as much as I could.

Phew, that was a close one! I'd only taken my eye off the path for a moment, but this area seemed like it was full of monsters. It was all I could do to avoid the trees and rocks; I really didn't want anything else blocking the road.

I mean, when you saw a dragon barreling towards you at full speed, wouldn't you let them have the right of way? Well, maybe dragons didn't usually roll around at full speed. It was just a skill left over from my days as an egg. But still!

As I continued my roll, I ran into a huge praying mantis (forestcutter), a big reddish monkey with vacant, beady little eyes (orangurang), a walking mushroom (wargmush), and a huge black-and-white-striped butterfly (zebrutterfly).

I was exhausted to the point of near collapse, but they just kept coming, one after the other. Besides the reddish monkey, most of them were pretty low

level, so I kept knocking them out. Status updates popped up one after another and showed my experience points rising. It was a legit hit and run situation.

“Young Plague Dragon” Lv 3 has become Lv 8.

Huh? Is it just me or was that a huge level-jump all of a sudden? I guess it is normal to level up faster at lower levels, but I got all the way to level 8 just by running around.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 8/40

HP: 28/71

MP: 12/75

Attack: 68

Defense: 57

Magic: 65

Agility: 62

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 1

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Fall Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Light Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 4

View Status: Lv 3

Baby's Breath: Lv 2

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 3

Pest Killer: Lv 2

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 1

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 4

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 1

Wrongdoer: Lv 2

Calamity: Lv1

Chicken Runner: Lv 1

Hm? I was still pretty far below the giant spider's level, but my stats were coming along. Then there was my species and rank. The spider was a D Rank monster, but I was a D+. I wondered if that affected how high my stats got.

The spider's overall stats were still a bit higher than mine, and it had recovered nearly all of its HP, probably from the Automatic HP Recovery. I was still at a disadvantage, but I had the upper hand in terms of skills.

Two of the taranturouge's skills, Spidersilk and Double Poison, had no effect on me. I could burn the silk with my Baby's Breath, and I had level 3 protection against poison-based attacks. So it couldn't hit me at close range. And now that my stats were higher, maybe I had a chance at victory? Since my agility had increased, I might be able to outrun it using Roll at full speed, but I was already feeling drained and woozy, my concentration slipping...if I tried to go any faster I was pretty sure I'd just crash.

I could either keep up my dangerous exhausted driving, or just put an end to this stalker once and for all.

I chose the latter, of course. I was gonna pound that spider for making me run around all crazy like this.

PART 7

I ABRUPTLY DROPPED my speed and kicked off the ground, pivoting in midair. As soon as my feet touched the ground, I hit the brakes, skidding to a halt for several meters that left the bottoms of my feet scraped up.

I wanted to stop slowly, but I didn't have time for that. I needed enough momentum to knock my enemy hard. Suddenly, there it was—the dark red giant spider, the taranturouge, with its tongue dangling obscenely out of its mouth. I checked its skills one more time so I could plan my first move.

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 3

Spidersilk: Lv 4

Paralyzing Tongue: Lv 2

Double Poison: Lv 2

Its Bite skill was pretty high. Between its high attack level and my dwindling HP, it might knock me out in one hit. And a high skill level meant it used that skill a lot. Luckily, that was also its closest-range attack, which was good for me. Would its first move be the paralyzing attack, since that one had more reach? Nah, it didn't know that I had Poison Resistance. It *had*, however, experienced my fire breath firsthand. The Double Poison attack was a good bet.

But now the tough part was trying to figure out exactly what Double Poison would be like. I had Venom Fangs and Paralyzing Venom Claws, but since the spider's skill didn't name a body part, it could be a mid-range attack that launched venom at me through...some freaky method. I had to be ready for whatever it threw at me.

Divine Voice Lv 3 only told me specifics about my own skills. Maybe I should've been more aggressive about communicating with it so I could level it up more. But it still kind of creeped me out. I asked it for help when I needed it,

so it felt a little churlish to mention it now, but I definitely got the feeling it was manipulating me.

Anyway, no matter what the spider came at me with, I should respond with Baby's Breath, since it had the greatest reach. Now that my stats were higher, I could follow up with a chain of physical attacks as soon as it landed, and hopefully knock that spider out in one go. I hadn't even tried Disease Breath yet—honestly, I was afraid of getting another scary title if I tried it, so there was no way I'd use it here. That left me back at Baby's Breath.

I drew a bunch of air into my lungs, keeping my eye on the taranturouge as it scuttled toward me and running the battle simulation in my head. There were some small rocks on the ground right in front of me. As soon as the spider reached them, I'd blast it with Baby's Breath. I'd prepare myself to take damage and cut through the hot wind. I'd land an uppercut on the spider's chin to close its mouth. Then I'd beat it senseless with Dragon Punch. If it still wasn't dead, I'd keep spamming my close-range attacks. Yeah, that was a good plan. The spider's recovery skill meant I couldn't mess around; I had to go big or go home. Drawing the fight out too long would put me at a disadvantage. I needed to get it over with fast.

The taranturouge stuck out its tongue and opened its big mouth wide. That freaked me out. It would make sense to open its mouth if it was going to use Bite, but why was its tongue hanging out? Surely it wouldn't bite like that. What was it going to do?

It still hadn't reached the rocks, but I decided to accelerate my plan and use Baby's Breath. But the next instant some kind of purple smoke obscured my vision. I felt it entering my throat.

"Auughh!"

All right, apparently Double Poison was a cloud of poisonous smoke. And since it was gaseous, it covered a lot of ground. Its scope was even wider than Baby's Breath.

I'm in trouble. This is bad. I can't use Baby's Breath if I can't breathe!

I immediately fell back, but the taranturouge charged me through the smoke. It used its Bite attack right where I'd been seconds before—a swing and a miss.

It was so close that I took a chance and kicked off it, using the momentum to jump backwards. I spread my wings and gained a bit of distance.

Time to start from square one. The taranturouge kept the distance between us and stared me down. It wasn't moving; I figured it had taken a hit when I jumped off of it. We'd both taken a hit, then. But on my side, the poison smoke hadn't done much to me—no negative status effects, just an unpleasant sensation deep in my throat, and a swollen feeling wherever it had touched me directly.

Should I use Baby's Breath next? Considering my abused throat, I doubted it would be very powerful. But it didn't need to be—it just had to scare my opponent. Although if I missed, the spider would bite me and it would be all over.

If I attacked straight on, Breath's range was too small to get a good hit. It wouldn't make or break the fight, but it was definitely a bad bet.

But I still wasn't sure how to lure my enemy in close enough to give me a good opening. Going purely by stats, it still had me beat in agility. The gap wasn't huge, but I still didn't want the spider slipping behind me.

Maybe I could use Roll to get the speed advantage and bash myself against its side. No, even that wouldn't work. If I got that stupidly close to it, I'd be giving it an opportunity to use Bite again.

Roll might be a good method of transportation, but in the future I should only use it against weak enemies. Back when I was an egg I could use it to defeat darkwyrms, but that was because the shape of the wyrms' bodies made it easy to quickly grab them.

The taranturouge's ranged skill beat Baby's Breath's reach, so that was out. I couldn't tackle it using Roll, and if I used any other kind of physical attacks, it would use Double Poison on me again. My only choices were to eat the cloud of poison and beat it in hand-to-hand combat while suffering the effects, run away using Roll, or try to use Disease Breath to inflict negative status effects on the spider so I could flee. Only I'd never used Disease Breath before, so I wasn't entirely sure what would happen. I didn't know its range, or what it actually did to the enemy, either.

Wasn't there anything else I could do? A sure bet, something that would definitely defeat this huge spider?

PART 8

THE TARANTUROUGE and I stared each other down, motionless. I needed to defeat it, but I was completely out of ideas. I could see all its ability scores; I didn't want to throw myself into a losing hand-to-hand battle. Even its Breath attack was better than mine.

But if it was so much stronger than me, why was it still just standing there doing nothing? It still had the Fury condition, so it had to be eager to eat me alive. The knock on the back of its head that I gave it was to get some distance between us, not to deal damage, and it shouldn't have hurt it enough to stop it.

Maybe it wasn't glaring at all. Maybe it was just observing me. But why would it do that now, after all this time? The only thing that I could think of was that it was confused why its cloud of poison didn't have me writhing on the ground in agony. Or was it waiting for the effects of the poison to kick in? I did inhale a lot of it. I didn't expect my resistance skill to protect me from that much damage.

That made sense. It was waiting for the poison to finish me off, so this impasse didn't matter. If it was convinced its plan would work, maybe I could use that to my advantage.

I squinted, trying to get a better look at the tarantourouge's face. Now I was sure of it. It was definitely waiting for the poison to weaken me. It was under the effects of Fury, but it must have realized our strength was pretty well-matched after I nearly kicked off its head. This was a safer, more reliable method of finishing me off.

That gave me a plan. It wasn't a *great* plan, but it was worth a try.

"Raaaaaaar!"

I fell to my knees and coughed for effect, clawing frantically at my throat. If this didn't work, I'd be the biggest clown in the world. Maybe the spider would just casually walk up and shoot me with Double Poison again to finish me off. My Just an Idiot skill level would skyrocket as I took my dying breaths.

I glanced anxiously over at the tarantourouge. Its tongue was dangling out of its mouth again, aimed at me.

Yes, it's falling for it!

Title Skill: "Liar" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

I leveled up another sketchy skill, but I only had one life. I had to do this right or I'd die. The taranturouge closed the distance between us and drew its tongue back in, before leaping into the air. Hold up. It *retracted its tongue*, which meant it wasn't going to use Paralyzing Tongue. And it wouldn't retract to use Double Poison, either. It only had one other skill. It must have figured I was weak enough from the poison that one good Bite would finish me off once and for all.

I could do it. If I'd read its strategy well, I could predict how it would respond. My throat still hurt a little, but it didn't matter. I leapt to my feet, drew in a deep breath, and blasted Baby's Breath at the airborne taranturouge.

Just try to evade that, buddy!

My sudden attack startled it. It shot out Spidersilk towards the ground to try to change course, but it was too late. The instant my fiery breath touched the web, it erupted into flames. Not only had the taranturouge completely wasted a skill attack, now it was off balance. The hot blast consumed it, knocking it to the ground in an unsightly sprawl of flailing legs. I pounced, smacking it upside the head with my Dragon Punch.

First round goes to me. Victory will be mine. Now I can kill it.

The taranturouge hit the ground, the impact reverberating through its body, its eight spindly legs twitching with agony. I ripped into its back with my claws and followed up with Roll to shred its back to pieces. Still rolling, I sprang lightly off the taranturouge's back and used the force of the revolutions and the weight of my tail to smash its head in. That was the finishing blow. Its legs stilled and it sprawled limply across the earth.

Gained 104 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 104 experience points.

Yes! I got him in one fell swoop! Getting that notification was enormously reassuring. That was the most experience I'd ever gotten at one time. Before this my record was the 60 I received from that Lv 14 graywolf when I was

bringing Myria to her village. It made sense, though; I had been purposely targeting enemies much weaker than me.

“Young Plague Dragon” Lv 8 has become Lv 14.

Whoa! Yeah, just as I thought—defeating an enemy with a much higher level than you levels you up super fast. Now I just had to hope it came with that special skill I was after...

Normal Skill “Baby’s Breath” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Uh-huh, uh-huh. That one really helped me out this time. It might contain the word “Baby,” but I was glad I had an attack with such a big reach. It really worked against the Spidersilk, too.

Gained Special Skill “Dragon Tail” Lv 1.

Dragon Tail? Like the tail on my body?

Oh, that’s right. I used my tail for the finishing blow, so a skill like that made sense. That was all fine and good, but I thought I’d get, you know...*more*. For instance—and this is just an example—Human Transformation.

Title Skill “Pest Killer” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

The spider was a bug, so that made sense. Maybe the taranturouge was really scared when I punched it out because of that title skill. It’s possible that without Pest Killer, it would have beaten me. That was a close fight, after all.

So, getting back to the point. The thing where I can turn into a human...

Silence.

Huh...? That’s it? You’d better not tell me that the whole speech you gave me about the Plague Dragon was a lie.

The Divine Voice seemed like a jerk, so I wouldn’t be surprised if it’d lied to me. But this was just too cruel. Was Human Transformation even still an option? Did I have to do something before I could get it?

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 14/40

HP: 20/92

MP: 4/95

Attack: 89

Defense: 75

Magic: 85

Agility: 77

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 1

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Fall Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Light Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 4

View Status: Lv 3

Baby's Breath: Lv 3

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 3

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 4

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 1

Wrongdoer: Lv 2

Calamity: Lv1

Chicken Run: Lv 1

I'd already surpassed the stats I had back when I maxed out my levels as a Baby Dragon. But I still wasn't anywhere close to the Little Rock Dragon. Its attack power was more than 150. I wanted to be stronger than that someday. That dragon was a C Rank monster. Far, far above me. Maybe I'd be able to beat it if I evolved again.

PART 9

AFTER CLAIMING VICTORY against the tarantourouge, I holed up inside a nearby cave to rest. I'd caught a Lv 4 graywolf on the way there and tore into it with my claws, then lit a fire with Baby's Breath and some branches I'd gathered. The cave grew smoky, but since I was close to the entrance I didn't mind too much.

I cooked the graywolf meat over the flame, then crushed up some kind of wild seeds and glazed the meat with the paste to try to cover up the gamey taste.

I wasn't sure what the seeds were; they resembled little red beans that grew in clusters, kind of like peppercorns. They didn't have much flavor, but their aroma stirred up my appetite. Honestly, the flavor of the meat didn't bother me *that* much, this was just an excuse to try out these sort-of-peppercorns. I didn't have anything better to do than hunting and culinary experimentation, anyway.

Yeah, it was pretty good. Not only did the peppercorns improve the taste of the meat, they added a little spice that made my stomach growl. Not bad at all. Maybe I could make this cave my base and start stockpiling these little seeds. They were kind of wet and squishy when I crushed them up, but—oh, I could dry them in the sun to preserve them. This was actually starting to be fun.

Gained Title Skill “Mr. Chef.”

Well, now it just feels like you're spying on me during my personal time, which I don't love. Don't you have any respect?

I swallowed the last bite, tearing the remaining flesh from the bone. *Whew, I'm stuffed.* I was pretty desensitized to nastiness after dining on caterpillars and spiders, but man, there was nothing like a home-cooked meal. Making something yourself is satisfying and good for mental health, too. Even if all you do is add a little spice and throw it on the fire!

Mr. Chef, huh? Maybe I could raise that skill and win over the villagers with a delicious meal. Nah, probably not. Even with incredible cooking abilities, they'd probably just think I was fattening them up to eat them later. After all, look at me! They'd be totally justified if they tried to kill me before I killed them first. Anyway, I wouldn't be able to cook as well as a human could. Claws got in the

way too much.

I gathered the leftover pelt, skull, and entrails from the wolf and shoved them into a corner of the cave, then lay down on the floor. The earth was cool and rather soothing nice, but I suspected it would be much more comfy if I laid down that pelt like a blanket. Lying on the bumpy ground wasn't too bad, though—maybe because of the Dragon Scale skill.

I didn't have much HP or MP left, so I figured I should just take it easy and rest for the day. I'd leveled up a bunch, but it was too dangerous to go out before recovering. Now that my max HP had gotten so high, being this low made me anxious.

For example, I wouldn't bat an eyelash if my HP was 12/15 or something, but if I leveled up and it was 12/100, I'd feel like I was on the verge of death. I knew realistically it shouldn't, but it made me really uneasy. Every time I had to start back down at Lv 1, my HP shot up dramatically, so this just kept happening.

I'd feel a lot better if I had some recovery magic like Rest, but I hadn't been able to use it at all since I evolved into a Young Plague Dragon. I wondered if it was because I leveled up the Wrongdoer skill. That really sucked, since I'd gone to so much effort practicing Rest to learn it. Hitting a dead end with it was a nasty blow.

I had this thought that maybe if I used recovery magic on a hurt villager I could gain their trust. You know, say they came into the forest to forage for mushrooms and got attacked by a monster or something, suddenly I'd show up and use Rest on them. Something like that.

But let's get real—none of the villagers were going to venture where monsters roamed. Or at least I hadn't seen any so far. I had this fantasy that if things went smoothly, maybe I could get them to think I was the god who protected their village, or some kind of traveler's deity, and they'd worship me. Fat chance of that now. I still wanted to believe I had another shot at white magic after evolution, though.

But all I could do in this form was spread disease. One wrong move and the entire village could turn against me. Then I'd have no choice but to leave this forest.

I looked completely different now, too. Back when I was a Baby Dragon I was pretty darn cute, but now I was a predator, big and deadly with jet-black scales. I looked, honestly, scary. Every time I caught my reflection in the water, it took my breath away. I looked almost demonic.

My fangs and claws were sharper than before, too. Myria probably wouldn't even recognize me. She probably only intervened when the swordsman attacked me because I was a cute Baby Dragon. If I'd had these black diamond scales all over me and razor sharp claws back then, she probably would've let him kill me.

I was lured down this path because of the promise of Human Transformation, but I was beginning to really think I'd made a mistake. I was becoming an enemy of mankind. Not only that, I didn't even have the Human Transformation skill yet!

My appearance was horrifying, and I just kept gaining weirder and more frightening skills. I bet things would be totally different if only I had chosen to become a Mini Angel Dragon. I'm sure I'd look much softer and less terrifying.

The very least they could do was give me the Human Transformation skill already. This was a total con. Who could I sue about this?

Chapter 4:

Iron-Walled Potortoise

PART 1

I OPENED MY EYES. The cave was dark, and I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. Light pooled by the entrance, but I wasn't sure if it was morning or afternoon. Cave life kind of made you lose all track of time.

Not that I had any reason to keep to a regular schedule, since all I did was eat and sleep. When I was full I went to sleep, and when I was hungry I got back up again. Dragons had a pretty easy life.

I brought up my stats to check the recovery situation. I'd rested for a really long time, so I expected to be near full health.

View Status.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 14/40

HP: 92/92

MP: 95/95

My HP and MP were both full. Heck yes! I wasn't going to drop dead in this forest. If I saw any monsters stronger than me, I'd run away, and if my HP dropped, I'd just come back to my cave to recover.

So what should I do today? Probably just level up and gather food. I can get more of those red peppercorn things, and any other fruit or berries that look tempting. I also want a blanket; I should add hunting graywolves to the day's activities. Maybe I could try making some clothes or something for when I finally transform into a human?

I wasn't counting on it at this point, but you never know—I might still find a way to learn that skill.

Divine Voice had always been pretty shady, and I was beginning to suspect it of blatant deception. Maybe just *some* Plague Dragons got the Human Transformation skill. Still, I wanted to be prepared, just in case. Chances weren't good, but they weren't zero, either.

And even if I *did* get Human Transformation, it wasn't like it would come with clothes. If I went traipsing into the village nude, they'd think I was some kind of freak. Even if I couldn't make legit clothes, I could at least make a cloak or something to cover myself.

But I knew I should prepare myself for disappointment; I wouldn't be at all surprised if I never got Human Transformation at all. If I did, great. But for now, I wasn't going to get my hopes up. If it *did* happen...I hoped the human version of me was at least good-looking. What did I look like, anyway, back when I was human? Before I got into that egg? I couldn't remember anything at all.

Back when I was human... I guess that meant my past life. A dragon lived a long time, and this was clearly a different world, so I was starting to accept that was just what happened. Reincarnation. At the start of this I kept expecting to wake up and have things go back to normal, or to discover that I was part of some kind of evil experiment, shoved into an egg-shaped capsule or something. Or maybe I had been sent away to some foreign country as part of a prank TV show. I had imagined all kinds of scenarios.

I wondered if maybe once I turned into a human, I'd see my face and all the memories of my past life would come flooding back. Maybe my appearance would be based on the me from before.

I was incredibly curious, but it didn't actually matter that much. If anything, remembering might just make this more painful. Maybe it was better that I'd forgotten after all.

So the plan was, I'd turn into a super good-looking human, meet up with Myria again and become friends with her, then reveal my true form. "Hey, I'm the dragon who saved you that time." Like that old folktale, *Crane's Return of a Favor*. Maybe I could make clothes out of my scales. Nah, probably not. That wouldn't work. Scraping my skin like that would probably hurt a ton.

Wasn't that kind of romantic, though? Not the scraping my skin part, just the

hopes and dreams part...

Okay, I should stop there.

I must really be a mess if I was having all these weird fantasies. I smacked myself in the face to try to snap out of it. This was not the time for daydreaming, it was time to leave this cave and do some leveling. Some nice monsters about half my level should do the trick. Something I could knock out with one good Dragon Punch.

I poked around and found a shallow pool of bright blue water. Or maybe that was talking it up a bit much. Wait, was it...wriggling? Was that a monster? It didn't look that strong, and so possibly good for gaining experience. Didn't seem like I could eat it, though. If I forced myself I bet I'd just get a stomachache.

Might as well use "View Status" on it to be sure.

Normal Skill "View Status" Lv 3 is unable to retrieve that information.

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Gaah! I think my brain's melting!

Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Wait, huh? Um...uh... What?! Okay, this is creepy! There's no way I should go anywhere near that guy!

Good thing I had View Status, or else I might've gotten close to the...whatever it was. I used the skill every day, but it had never been such a lifesaver before. If I hadn't decided to check it, I might be dead right now. The stats that I *could* see weren't that high, but there was a deep creepiness to all of it. It wasn't even that far away from the cave I'd settled down in.

Should I even be in this forest? Should that *village* even be in this forest, for that matter? I mean, there were some crazy monsters out here. I guessed that “S**me” meant “Slime”? If so, the slimes of this world were incredibly sinister. This was some Cthulhu-type stuff here!

At first I wondered if that weird View Status reaction happened because it was such a high level, or because it was much stronger than me, but this slime was only a Rank F+. So what was going on here?

Whatever the case, I needed to get the heck out of here before it noticed me. I had a feeling I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I got involved with it, which might not be very much longer. Because it could kill me on the spot. I kept my eye on the mysterious creature and backed away from it. Very, very slowly. I just really did not feel good about this slime!

Please don't notice me. Please don't notice me—whoa! I was walking backwards, and my foot got caught, knocking me off balance. The slime surged closer, most likely reacting to the noise. It wasn't fast, but it was definitely moving towards me, sliding across the ground without hesitation.

“Raaaaaaaaaar!”

I impulsively let out a roar and used Roll, retreating from the slime.

Gained Resistance Skill “Fear Resistance” Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill “Bellow” Lv 1.

Title Skill “Chicken Runner” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

PART 2

UPON MAKING MY successful escape from the slime, I walked through the forest and attempted to catch my breath. I could celebrate my safe retreat after I calmed down. Was that thing really as dangerous as I thought? Like I said before, the few stats I could make out weren't very high, its rank clearly displayed as F+.

View Status had saved my hide so many times, and I'd be incredibly scared if I ever lost the ability to use it. I'd been expecting that it might not work on some enemies due to their skill or level, but maybe being unable to view an opponent's status didn't necessarily mean it was stronger than me. Maybe the slime possessed a resistance or defense skill that blocked View Status.

Still, the way the text bugged out was super creepy. If it had just been blank or something, I would have been a lot less freaked out.

Why was I so scared of that puddle of goo, anyway? Now that I thought about it, there was no way it could kill me with its current stats. Next time I saw it, maybe I'd toss some rocks at it from a safe distance or... *Huh? What's that?*

On the ground before me sat a dark green pot, flipped upside down. *Hey, that would make a good container to hold the peppercorns and any berries I gathered!* I was planning to preserve some food, after all. The pot didn't look like someone had accidentally dropped it, either—more like it was discarded. First, I'd look inside to see what it contained, and try to find its owner. But if it really had just been thrown away, I'd take it home and use it for myself.

I approached the pot. I couldn't see anyone else around here, but as I reached out to touch it, it suddenly jumped up and tackled me.

"Raar?!"

Ouch!

It took me completely off guard, knocking me right in my unprotected chin and landing a stiff blow to my chest before swiftly backing away.

I didn't take that much damage, but I still had a deep, reverberating pain in

my bones. I stared at the pot and saw green arms and legs sticking out from it. What the heck was this thing? It was obviously a monster, but what kind?

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/35

HP: 28/28

MP: 27/27

Attack: 21

Defense: 145

Magic: 43

Agility: 12

Rank: D-

Special Skills:

Tortoise Shell: Lv 4

Heat Sensor: Lv 3

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 1

Water Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Shell Retreat: Lv 3

Bite: Lv 1

Iron Tackle: Lv 2

Call Allies: Lv 3

Slow: Lv 1

Rest: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Iron-Walled Defender: Lv 4

Dunce: Lv 2

Potortoise? So it's a turtle or something?

All I saw was arms and legs, no head or tail. It had an awfully big shell—absurdly rounded, too. Just like its name suggested, its shell really did look like a clay pot. I wondered if I could use it as one after I beat it.

The potortoise was incredibly sturdy, but besides its high defense, its stats weren't that great. It didn't seem to have any worrying skills, either.

I couldn't believe this thing had the nerve to ambush me like that. I crept up close and hit it with a Dragon Punch at the base. An uppercut, I guess you'd call it.

My blow threw it into the air, and I landed Dragon Punches on the mouth of the pot and around its midsection. The potortoise flew a few meters and slammed against a tree.

Oof, my fists hurt. Just how hard was this thing? I had to have done some damage though, right? But the potortoise got up like nothing had happened and began to slowly edge away from me. *Hey, c'mon. Don't tell me I didn't do any damage at all.*

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/35

HP: 24/28

MP: 27/27

You've got to be kidding me.

I gave this loser a double Dragon Punch and all it did was a measly 4 points of damage? Which meant if I wanted to take him out, I had to do twelve punches in a row? That was wild. By the time I finally beat it, there probably wouldn't be much of a pot left.

I had no idea how to beat the thing without breaking its shell. There was no way Baby's Breath would come close to penetrating its defense. Besides, it seemed to have a lid-like mechanism inside, so when it was in danger, it drew its arms and legs inside the pot and then shut itself up tight like a sea snail.

This was proving to be a tougher fight than I expected, but at least all of its other stats were negligible. It barely had any attack ability. The only offensive skill I could see was Iron Tackle, which was probably what it had used when it ambushed me earlier. It had barely done any damage. I was certain the potortoise wouldn't be able to kill me, even if I slipped up.

It did seem edible, though, so it was the perfect prey. I just had to defeat it. My HP was in good shape, so I might as well take it on. It was high return with no risk. And even if something zany happened and it tricked me, I was much faster. I could just run away.

Before I started anything, I decided to check its status one more time. I needed to figure out its vulnerabilities.

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/35

HP: 28/28

MP: 21/27

Huh? Isn't that recovery time a bit fast? It already recovered the 4 HP I took. How is that possible?! Isn't it usually way slower?!

So that was the power of Automatic HP Recovery Lv 2... Hang on a second, its MP dropped. I guess it just used Rest to heal itself. It was probably being cautious, but that sure ate up a lot of its MP. If it kept healing, it would be completely drained in no time.

Well, who cares. I'd just run back over and knock the potortoise into the air again with another uppercut Dragon Punch.

Ugh, my fists hurt so bad! But I have to keep punching just as hard, even if I bust something. Otherwise I won't be able to beat the damn thing.

I tossed the potortoise up and performed simultaneous Dragon Punches to its right and left sides, like I was juggling a volleyball. *All right, here's the third punch! Ow! I can do this! Another uppercut!*

I threw the potortoise again and knocked it around with both of my fists. I spun in midair to give myself some momentum before lashing out with a Dragon Tail.

But I still wasn't done.

I spun around again, pummeling the potortoise into the ground with my fists. Its body sank into the soft earth.

Title Skill "Infighter" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

That was hit number seven. *Man, this is rough...*

My fists were throbbing, but I was slowly whittling away at its HP as I continued to punch. Taking its recovery skills into account, I'd have to give it fourteen more blows in succession. God, there was no way. Absolutely no way... My hands were swollen and red! My beautiful dark scales were gonna fall off!

I'd just take a little break to see how much damage I gave him...

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/35

HP: 14/28

MP: 21/27

Whoa, that worked even better than I thought it would! I'm halfway there! Let's do this! If I let up now, all the hard work I just did would be for nothing!

My fists and tail were tight and aching, but I'd just have to push through the pain. Determination and willpower! Seven more punches to go! Only seven more and victory would be mine.

Now that I think about it, don't determination and willpower kinda mean the same thing?

While I slipped momentarily into an inner monologue that had absolutely no bearing on my current situation, a gentle glow enveloped the potortoise's body. *Hey, knock that off!*

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/35

HP: 28/28

MP: 15/27

...Ugh, it used Rest. You idiot, you knew it was going to do that! And you didn't even prepare for it!

I frantically grabbed hold of the tortoise and tried clawing at the gaps around the lid with all my might.

Open up! If only you didn't have this stupid lid! Come on!!

A cracking sound split the air. One of my claws snapped off at its base.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!"

My loud roars echoed throughout the quiet forest.

PART 3

FOLLOWING THAT TRAGEDY, I tried various tactics to whittle down the potortoise's HP. I nearly broke my teeth using Venom Fangs. Another one of my nails snapped and went flying when I tried Paralyzing Venom Claws. Everything I tried hurt. I cried.

I tried covering the potortoise with tree branches and burning it with Baby's Breath. That did damage, but not enough to stand up against Automatic HP Recovery. Every single time I hurt it, it recovered and undid all my progress.

I had no tricks left. I tried everything, but nothing worked. Sometimes the potortoise would let out this noise like "*Pttooort?*" like it was making fun of me. Crap. It really was making a fool out of me.

I decided to make one last ditch effort. I picked the potortoise up and started walking. I'd already given up on ripping off its pot whole to use as a container, so now I was just after the experience points. That opened up my options a little. I'd already come this far; there was no way I was leaving without a victory. Walking away empty-handed at this point was too frustrating to think about.

So even though I knew it was crappy of me, I had to do it. *Don't hold it against me.* I just really needed to learn Human Transformation so I could get off the road to evil.

I stood at the edge of the cliff I had crossed trying to escape the Taranturouge. I reached down gently and caressed the potortoise's pot.

I promise that your death won't be in vain. I'll grow stronger from it. So please forgive me.

"Pttooort? Tooort?!"

It must have sensed something, because its noises grew distressed. I shook my head and then tossed the potortoise off the edge of the cliff.

"Pttooouooooooooooooort!"

It fell down, down, down into the deep chasm below. Its screams echoed off the earthen walls, overlapping as they traveled back up to my ears. Finally, the

potortoise hit the ground and shattered, the rushing waters of the muddy stream below swallowing it up, silencing its death rattle.

Farewell, potortoise. You were a formidable foe.

Gained 36 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 36 Experience Points.

“Young Plague Dragon” Lv 14 has become Lv 15.

The message announcing the death of my foe appeared, confirming more experience and another level under my belt. The moments after a difficult battle always felt weirdly empty. The potortoise and I each gave it everything we had, acknowledged each other’s strengths as we matched skills and wits, and then the time came to say goodbye forever.

I turned my back on the chasm, ruminating on how harsh nature was, but at the same time feeling a sense of accomplishment, and the accompanying pleasant rush.

Gained Title Skill “Dastardly King” Lv 1.

Title Skill “Wrongdoer” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

I tried my best to make it a clean fight, but I’d had a feeling this was going to happen. All these title skills weighed heavily on my mind and I’d built them up a lot, but in practice they didn’t have much effect. Still, “Dastardly King” was a bit much. I mean, I wasn’t about to just walk away from the potortoise taunting me, was I? What choice did I have? I had a feeling I’d get some nasty title when I flung it off the cliff, but I did it anyway.

I wanted the experience points. Doing all that work and having nothing to show for it was just too much. I realized that killing a creature without the excuse of self-preservation, and that I had no plans to eat, was a crime against nature. But it had to be done.

I hurled it off the cliff. I got the experience. I had the thing I wanted, so it didn’t give its life in vain. Yeah.

But I still kept getting awarded all these negative titles. My evolution path ahead was growing pretty obvious. It felt kind of like being unemployable

because of a bad job history, or something.

I really didn't want to turn into a big evil dragon, though, so I would have to veer back toward the innocent path of love and light, the one where I could coexist with the humans.

Anyway, that wore me out. *I'll just hunt enough for a meal, gather some plants, and head home.* I was still a little bitter that I hadn't managed to get a pot. I didn't mind keeping my stuff on the ground, but it really wreaked havoc on my interior design.

Well...maybe I could make my own pot? I could find some clay, dig it up, mold it into shapes, heat it and bam! Crockery.

I just needed something to fire it with; I was fairly sure it had to be a high temperature. Could I do it with Baby's Breath, or would that just turn it to ashes? Guess I wouldn't know until I tried.

I had all the time in the world, so I might as well try to spend it on something worthwhile. After all, they were making pots in Japan all the way back in the Jomon Era. So why not me?

I could put a rug down in that cave and line a bunch of pots up on it. Yeah, that sounded really good. I bet with a little effort, it could look pretty nice. Maybe I could make some paintbrushes and draw a design on the wall. *All right, now I'm getting excited.*

It felt nice to have goals.

As I retreated further from the cliff, I became aware of a rustling in the trees and bushes around me. Something was coming, and whatever it was, there were more than one of them. *Just listen to the losers, trying to sneak up on me. Come on out and show yourselves already!*

"Raaaaaaaaaar!"

I let out a little roar to warn them off. So, would they run or would they come out? If they were the kind of monsters who stayed calm and had enough intelligence to wait so patiently, maybe this would be an interesting fight.

The rustling in the brush stopped and everything went quiet. Then ten pots—

no, *potortoises*—emerged from the bushes and headed right towards me.

Talk about déjà vu.

I quickly checked their statuses. Their levels, attack powers, and skills weren't anything crazy. And none of them had their status screens bugged out like that slime from earlier.

Were they out for revenge? Thinking back, that potortoise *did* have the Call Allies ability. That last scream it let out must have summoned all these guys. They weren't very fast, so I could outrun them if I didn't feel like fighting.

Their shells were too tough for regular attacks, so my only recourse was to throw them off the cliff. The idea left a bad taste in my mouth and the promise of another uncomfortable title. My level would go up some if I tossed them off the cliff, but not a whole lot. It was way more efficient to just hunt graywolves.

I know you're all burning for revenge, but I have to bail on you guys. Sorry!

PART 4

I KICKED OFF THE GROUND, spread my wings, and gained enough height to make a good leap. I didn't have time to play games with a herd of potortoises, so as soon as I jumped over them, I made a run for it.

The ten potortoises pushed their heads out of their pot shells and glared at me as I sailed above them. *Oh, so they do have heads.* The last one only poked its arms and legs out.

"Pttort."

"Pttooort."

"Pttort."

"Tooort."

"Tooort."

"Pttooort."

"Ptooort."

"Tort."

"Ptort."

"Pttooort."

All ten of the potortoises made weird sounds as they watched me. And then a hazy, purple light started heading my way.

Gah, what *was* that? Magic? The attack didn't seem very precise, so I edged to the right and then the left to avoid it. I definitely didn't want to catch a whiff of whatever that was. What skills did they have again...? Was that Slow? They must've been trying to take away my speed.

Oof, one of them got me.

The light touched me and began to seep into my body. It didn't hurt, exactly, but a strange discomfort began to spread. Two—no, three more beams of the light entered me for a grand total of four doses.

Eugh. God, I feel sick. I have the weirdest sense of vertigo right now. Nothing around me is moving at all, even though I'm jumping... Or am I the one moving slowly? It feels like I'm pinned in the air.

The potortoises began to pile themselves up into a ten-story tower right in front of me, until the one at the top reached my eye level.

"Pttort!"

It pulled in its arms, legs, and head and launched itself at me. Because of Slow, I couldn't guard in time and took a heavy hit to my chest. Luckily its attack power was low and it didn't do much damage. There was no reason to panic.

That's right, no reason to pan—Ow!

It tackled me in midair, and as I fell towards the ground the ninth potortoise came hurtling towards me.



"Ttort!"

Okay, they're way too heavy! What the heck do they eat?! Agh, here comes number eight!

"Argh!"

The seventh.

"Ergh!"

Then the sixth, fifth, and fourth. I ended up getting tackled six times. The damage incurred from each of them was small, but a chain of ten attacks still packed a punch. I hit the ground on my back, face-up. The potortoises immediately set on me with the full force of their weight, one after the other.

Ow! Ow! That really hurts! I'm sorry! I apologize for my actions, so please knock it off!

I used Roll at its fastest speed to try to escape from the herd. I was still affected by Slow, so it wasn't really that fast, but I still managed to put some distance between us.

Crap, they're still circling around toward me. I'm just too slow right now.

I switched off Roll and shot the potortoises a nasty look.

Let me check their statuses again. They're not still shooting out Slow, are they? That magic is way too dangerous.

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 10/35

HP: 24/30

MP: 19/29

Species: Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 7/35

HP: 16/24

MP: 13/23

At least Slow seemed to cost 10 MP. They could all hit me with one more each, but nothing after that. I was beginning to feel like my normal speed was returning. *Don't hit me with more Slow! Give me a break.*

Wait, why was their HP so low? They had Automatic HP Recovery, so I doubted they already had that kind of damage when we started. I checked the other potortoises' statuses, and their HP was all over the place. About half of them hadn't taken any damage at all.

Oh wait, I think I know what it's from. Fall damage? That would make all the different levels of HP loss make sense. The ones toward the bottom of the tower wouldn't have taken much damage when they fell.

Potortoises were tough, but they were also heavy. They had high Physical Resistance and Magic Resistance, but they didn't have Fall Resistance at all.

I've finally found their weakness. I didn't have to throw them off a cliff; I could use their potential energy, their own mass, against them. *All right, let's try it.*

I stopped, raising my arms slowly as I watched the potortoises' movements. They pounced on me from three directions. The first one hit me from the back, another from the side. I endured the hits, planting my legs and bracing myself for the last attack I knew was coming.

The third potortoise tackled me head-on, but I was ready for it and snatched it up with both arms.

"Pttoort?!"

The potortoise flailed, but I didn't let go. Instead, I kicked off the ground as hard as I could and leapt up into the air. I spread my wings to increase my momentum.

“T-toorrt!”

The potortoises were stunned for a moment, then quickly started reassembling their tower. I had to admire their teamwork. The potortoise on top jumped at me, but only managed to graze my leg. *Sorry, guys. You are now unfortunately one tortoise too short.*

I was so high up now that the potortoises couldn't reach me. I blew Baby's Breath downward, propelling myself up high like a rocket. Looking down at the tower from my vantage point, the potortoises seemed much smaller than before. *I must be pretty high up. Maybe I accidentally used Breath Rocket or something.*

I spun around in the air, using my momentum to throw my captive potortoise at the tower. With that mass from this height, I had a feeling the force of gravity would hit them pretty hard. *Wait...what was the force of gravity in this world? Was it the same as on Earth?*

Gained Normal Skill “Meteorite” Lv 1.

Meteorite...? Oh, I guess I got that skill after I knocked the turtle away when it was jumping at me. My strategy turned into a skill, huh?

“Pttoooooort!”

The potortoise I threw towards the ground knocked into the side of the eight-story tower, destroying it. Each of the pot-shells cracked, the flesh inside tearing apart and scattering all around. *Oof. That was pretty gross.*

Gained 306 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 306 Experience Points.

“Young Plague Dragon” Lv 15 has become Lv 22.

Whoa, that's a big jump. Apparently getting an enemy to use Call Allies and hunting the group is a good way to get experience after all.

Special Skill “Fly” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Hopefully that will help me fly a little better. Oh, wait... One of them survived.

It was the first potortoise that jumped at me. The one I batted away with

Meteorite. It was still alive on the ground, slowly trying to escape. As soon as it realized I'd spotted it, it began to tremble. The effects of Slow had mostly worn off of me by now.

I went after the potortoise and grabbed it, doing the same jump, wing, breath rocket combo to get into the air, then used Roll to toss it to the ground.

Take this—Meteorite!

"Pttoooooooooort!"

The potortoise hit the ground, its shell splitting open. Its innards popped out, bloody and mangled, and its eyes were frozen open in shock.

Gained 36 Experience Points.

Title Skill: Walking Egg Lv — gained 36 Experience Points.

Cool, I leveled up pretty good. Time to check my stats!

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 22/40

HP: 58/116

MP: 43/113

Attack: 105

Defense: 91

Magic: 95

Agility: 93

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 2

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Fall Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Light Resistance: Lv 1

Fear Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 4

View Status: Lv 4

Baby's Breath: Lv 3

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Bellow: Lv 1

Meteorite: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 4

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 1

Wrongdoer: Lv 3

Calamity: Lv1

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 1

Dastardly King: Lv 1

Sweet, my attack power finally broke 100!

I still wasn't satisfied. I had to get all my stats over 200 *at least* before I could take on the Little Rock Dragon. God, I hated looking back at all these sketchy title skills. Did I really actually do anything to deserve the title Dastardly King? And now my Wrongdoer skill was up to Lv 3. How far did it go, anyway? What happened when I maxed it out? Did I just die?

Skills have a max Lv of 10.

O-oh, hey. It's been a while, Divine Voice. I guess I'll just confiscate this potortoise meat. It sucks I didn't get any of the shells. They're all broken.

On top of that, the many bodies were stuck with pieces of shell too small to dig out. Even the most intact were cracked or crumbling. It was difficult to sort out the shells from the meat. I wasn't sure about using the pots if they still had half a tortoise stuck to them. Sorting it all out didn't really seem worth it. I'd just have to make a pot from scratch with clay.

I chose the shell that was in the best shape and put all the salvageable meat inside to carry home. Guess it was turtle soup for dinner tonight. Sounded pretty delicious. Now I'd just gather up some plants that seemed edible. Vegetables were important to a balanced diet, after all.

I wondered if people's meals centered around grains in this world. I wished I could make some rice gruel to soak up the leftover soup broth. Maybe I could find some rice, or something like it.

I tossed the rest of the meat I tore off of the shells inside my pot and started for my cave. I was covered in blood and probably looked pretty grotesque. Nothing to be done about it.

I froze as I heard heavy footsteps approaching me from behind.

Oh no, a giant monster? I'd better run before it sees me.

"Pttoooooort."

Huh? Did I miss one? Its voice sounds pretty deep for a potortoise, though. And loud...

A crack broke through the forest, and suddenly trees began to fall. Then the creature showed itself...a gigantic upside down pot as big as a car, with arms and legs sticking out that were as big as my midsection. The instant I saw it, I knew it was way out of my league. What the heck kind of monster did those potortoises summon, anyway?

"TOOOOOOOOORT!"

Jeez, are you serious? This should be against the rules.

Species: Giant Potortoise

Status: Normal

Lv: 24/55

HP: 233/233

MP: 156/156

Attack: 74

Defense: 245

Magic: 76

Agility: 4

Rank: C-

Special Skills:

Tortoise Shell: Lv 5

Heat Sensor: Lv 4

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 5

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Water Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:

Shell Retreat: Lv 4

Bite: Lv 3

Iron Tackle: Lv 4

Hi-Slow: Lv 4

Rest: Lv 3

Aqua: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Iron-Walled Defender: Lv 6

Dunce: Lv 2

Tortoise Curse: Lv 1

It had stats over 200, and it was a Rank C—. It didn't have the attack power of the Little Rock Dragon, but it did have higher HP and defense.

This was bad. This was really bad. I couldn't defeat this guy. Its HP was just too high, and my attacks would barely puncture its defense. And my Meteorite/gravity strategy wouldn't work—there was no way I could lift that thing up high enough in the first place.

At least the Giant Potortoise's agility was incredibly low. Should I put down my heavy pot full of meat and make a run for it? I really wanted to find out how the potortoises tasted, though. Besides, the giant one was super slow, and its attack power wasn't that high, so even if it did try to attack me, I could deal with it. Right? Right.

I could definitely get myself and the pot full of meat to safety.

I gripped my dinner and began to run. The Giant Potortoise stuck out its head and stared me down.

"Ptooort!"

It let out a cry, before a cloud of purple light shot towards me. That had to be the Hi-Slow magic I saw on its status, most likely a beefed-up version of Slow. I absolutely couldn't let it hit me.

Gah!

The purple light! It touched me! And this huge tortoise has crazy MP! I knew I should've tossed the pot and made a run for it!

There was no way to take evasive maneuvers. The purple light seeped all the way into my body.

Damn it, I can barely move at all. I mean, I guess I'm technically moving, but so slowly I might as well be standing still.

Behind me, the potortoise closed in, trees decimated in its wake. It was beyond monstrous.

I gotta brace myself for its tackle! It's gonna tackle me!

I knew exactly what it was going to do, but I couldn't do anything about it. The potortoise plowed right into me with a body the size of a truck.

"Arghh!"

I was knocked backward, skidding across the ground in a painful roll. *Jeez, I know this guy's slow, but being that big should be against the rules. A few more hits and I'll be done for.*

Noo! My pot is rolling away and all the tortoise meat is scattering everywhere! I can't save my dinner! Guess I've got to consider this a learning experience and make a run for it. But can I even run for it?

The giant tortoise trudged after me, every step heavy. I got up as quickly as I could, which really wasn't that fast. If that thing got close enough, all it would have to do was crush me underfoot. There'd be no way for me to avoid it.

When I was almost on my feet, I activated my Roll skill. I couldn't use it before because I'd been holding onto the pot. But now that I was completely focused on saving myself, I'd be able to escape. Or at least, I *should* have been able to escape.

"Ptoooooort!"

The tortoise fired off another Hi-Slow at me. I changed directions as fast as I could to avoid it, but it shot off a second spell, and then a third. I couldn't dodge them all and the purple light consumed me.

Whooaa, I'm so slow! I'm rolling but it's so slow!

I glanced behind me. The Giant Potortoise was still coming, gradually closing the distance between us. Its agility was only 4, but from my perspective it was moving really fast.

Is it just me, or is Hi-Slow a little overpowered? Maybe its title skill Tortoise's Curse gives it a big boost?

The Giant Potortoise slowly caught up to me and I braced myself for another tackle. Once again I flew into the air, slamming head-first into the forest floor. The impact stunned me, blurring my vision. Searing pain raced through my back.

It was no use. As long as it kept using Hi-Slow on me, escape was impossible. The potortoise could keep hitting me completely unopposed. I could only withstand two, maybe three more tackles at the most before I lost consciousness.

If I can't escape, I need to think of a way to defeat it. But this situation is absolutely impossible!

Even if I *hadn't* taken a hit of Hi-Slow, there was nothing in my arsenal that could deal the potortoise a mortal wound. I mean, even aside from Automatic HP Recovery and Rest, few monsters out here could hope to break through its defense.

I couldn't drop it off the cliff, either. I might move it a single step backwards if I pummeled it head-on with Dragon Punch, but that was about it. *Okay, instead of sitting here thinking about it, I should be trying to run.*

Could I use the momentum from being knocked into the air to Fly? So far, I'd barely managed enough forward motion to glide. I could use Breath Rocket to get higher, but if I tried that while moving this slowly I'd just fall...

No, wait a minute. What if I stood on the edge of the cliff, then used the momentum when it hit me to reach the other side? After that all I would have to do was run away.

PART 5

I CHECKED MY STATUS to see how much stamina I had left.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Slow (Major)

Lv: 22/40

HP: 32/116

MP: 43/113

I could do this. I could withstand one more hit. I'd purposely take the Giant Potortoise's tackle and use the momentum to use Fly across the cliff and escape. That was my only option.

I used Roll to change direction, heading toward the cliff. The Giant Potortoise followed.

Yeah, keep it up! Now hit me one more time! Then we can say goodbye. And when I'm strong enough to crush you with one hit, I'll be back.

The Giant Potortoise charged me as I stood right on the edge. I got a little freaked out when I saw the force behind its tackle, but I couldn't dodge in this state anyway. I flew towards the edge of the cliff with very little resistance.

That was unpleasant, but I'm alive. Now I'll just spread my wings, fly across the cliff, and get out of here!

Unfortunately, I underestimated the effects of Hi-Slow. I thought I understood how the spell worked, but it turned out to be much stronger than I expected.

"Tooooooort!"

As I unfurled my wings, the Giant Potortoise shot me with another dose of Hi-Slow. I couldn't avoid it, and so I took the full hit of purple light. I slowed down even further, and the Giant Potortoise stuck its neck out, pursuing me over the

edge, trying to grab me before I could get away.

My HP was dwindling. If this thing bit me, I'd be dead. I absolutely had to dodge a direct attack. I could probably take a graze and still get away, though.

I undulated my body with as much force as I could muster, directing a Baby's Breath downward to push me further into the air. The Giant Potortoise's attack missed me, but just barely.

Before I could push away, one of my back claws got caught on the edge of its mouth and my front claw, which I'd been waving around frantically, caught on the edge of its eye. *I'm glad I survived, but how am I gonna fly when I'm stuck to this thing?*

I thrashed, trying to shake myself loose, but my claws wouldn't budge. The Giant Potortoise shook its neck back and forth, trying to peel me off its face.

I let out a blast of Baby's Breath, hoping to tear myself off even if I took some of its flesh with me. But its hide was just too hard.

I had to assume that the Giant Potortoise's main goal had shifted from avenging its kin to shaking me off by any means necessary. Hey, at least the two of us could enjoy having a common goal. But of course things could never be that simple.

If I dropped my guard and paused to carefully unhook my claws, the Giant Potortoise would certainly use that opportunity to get a free hit. I had no other choice but to continue this fruitless tug-of-war.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

"Pttoooooooooort!"

The potortoise was out of my weight class, but I made up for it with repeated applications of Baby's Breath at full force. *Please hold out, MP!*

Normal Skill "Baby's Breath" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Get off! Let me go! Get off! Let me go! Let me go! Let me goooo!

I knew my breath wouldn't last, and everything hurt. But I couldn't stop firing the jet of flame. It was all that was stopping the Giant Potortoise from dragging me close enough to kill.

I'd just have to keep using Baby's Breath until I died.

Gained Resistance Skill "Asphyxiation Resistance" Lv 1.

I'm still in this!! I'm gonna tear your skin off!

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!"

"TOOOOOOOOORT!"

I can do this! I'm winning! I can pull your stupid giant body over this cliff! Tear you to pieces! Tear your face off! I don't care as long as you let me go!

Normal Skill "Baby's Breath" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

Yes, yes! It's tilting more in my direction!

Resistance Skill "Asphyxiation Resistance" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Gained Title Skill "Stalwart" Lv 1.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!"

"PTTOOOOOOORT!"

Slowly but surely I pulled the potortoise closer to the edge, my claws still hooked in its face, until it was teetering on the edge of the drop. Then, finally, it leaned too far and lost its balance.

"Raar?!"

"Tort?!"

The ground beneath the tortoise crumbled, its huge frame plunging towards the ground. The force of its fall broke off my claws, finally freeing me from its leathery hide.

Owww! That really hurt!

No longer trapped, I heaved myself back towards the opposite end of the cliff like a ping pong ball. Hi-Slow picked that exact moment to wear off, so I immediately burst off at what felt like an incredible speed.

My vision spun and for a second I thought I'd lose consciousness. I felt a jarring impact, and then nothing. I must have slammed into a tree on the other side of the cliff.

Hah...hah...did I escape?!

“PTOOOOOOOOOORT!”

The Giant Potortoise’s scream echoed throughout the forest.

Huh? What happened?

It was a half-coherent thought, but a moment later a crash rang out from below, as if in answer.

Gained 288 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 288 Experience Points.

“Young Plague Dragon” Lv 22 has become Lv 30.

Gained Title Skill “Giant Killer” Lv 1.

Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

You are now able to view items in your possession in addition to detailed information regarding enemy monsters.

I looked toward the edge of the cliff. No Giant Potortoise. The spot where it stood had broken away. Oh, that’s right, it crumbled and...right, right. The potortoise fell.

I smacked myself on the cheek to restart my fuzzy brain. Carefully, I picked my way over to the edge and looked down at the remains of my foe. The Giant Potortoise must have crashed against the rocks jutting from the river.

All’s well that ends well, I guess. I’ll head back to the other side of the river. I’m pretty fond of that cave, and I want to score some of that Potortoise meat, too. Anyway, since I leveled up, I might as well check my status.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 30/40

HP: 8/140

MP: 10/137

Attack: 129

Defense: 110

Magic: 120

Agility: 109

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 2

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Fall Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Light Resistance: Lv 1

Fear Resistance: Lv 1

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 4

View Status: Lv 5

Baby's Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Bellow: Lv 1

Meteorite: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 4

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 1

Wrongdoer: Lv 3

Calamity: Lv1

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 1

Dastardly King: Lv 1

Stalwart: Lv 1

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Whoa, my HP and MP were at rock bottom. Just a few more Baby's Breaths and I would have been completely wiped out, and that Giant Potortoise would've killed me.

But I guess you truly do grow a lot when you're cornered, huh? My skills are really coming along. I thought I wouldn't evolve for a while, but it's coming up sooner than I expected.

I hoped I'd get to increase the levels of some skills like Protective Spirit or Itty-Bitty Hero before then.

For real though, why haven't I learned Human Transformation yet? There are only ten levels left before I evolve, so will I even have a chance to learn it? If I hit max Lv and don't get it, I think I might actually cry.

PART 6

I ARRIVED BACK at my new base without further incident, deposited my pot full of meat, and then headed back outside. I was a little worried about my HP, but I still had errands to run. I wanted more of those red peppercorn things and another ingredient for my turtle soup. Surely there would be something usable in the neighborhood. My HP would be fine for a little while.

Worst-case scenario, I'd run into that weirdo slime again. It was freaky, but its stats were low. If I saw it, I'd just kick its butt and rid myself of that anxiety once and for all.

Actually, although I hadn't checked it much since I beat the Giant Potortoise, my View Status skill had leveled up. I could check details about items in my possession now, not just monsters, so maybe gathering plants would get way easier. I'd be able to tell instantly if something was poisonous. Although I had Poison Resistance, so if it looked tasty enough I might eat it anyway. Might even raise my skill level.

I strolled through the grass, paying close attention to the ground, and noticed some mushrooms growing by the base of a tree, black and yellow in a tiger-striped pattern.

Hey, those look pretty good. I went ahead and plucked some up, holding them in my hand.

Lightning Shroom: Value E-. Absorbs nutrients from tree roots, causing those trees to stop bearing fruit due to parasitism. Since it has taken sustenance from another source, it is very nutrient dense and tastes delicious. However, it contains a mild Paralyzing Poison.

It steals from others while protecting itself. An underhanded mushroom.

Aw, don't say that. It's survival of the fittest out here. You gotta be a little crafty. It's eat or be eaten. Wait...why am I defending a mushroom? Anyway, I don't have Paralysis Resistance. So unfortunately, I'm gonna have to give up on this one.

Maybe I'd take it with me anyway. It said it only gave mild paralysis, so maybe

it wouldn't actually be that bad. I could use it to get the resistance skill.

I spotted a large blossom that resembled a sunflower with an oddly swollen stem. Curious, I drew closer to identify it. But before I could, the swollen stem burst open into a huge chomping mouth. I stopped it with a quick punch.

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

There are carnivorous plants out here?! It definitely doesn't look edible, but I'll check it out anyway.

Carnivorous Flower: Value C-. A rare plant that eats animals. Unable to digest sodium, therefore salt collects in the white tips of its roots, which can be burned to obtain the salt. Its value depends on the quality of the soil.

Aha! In my previous life I remember hearing about salt collecting in the leaves of trees, and the wind scattering the deposits across wide distances. This is great, actually. I could use some salt. I might as well take the roots with me.

I dug up the roots and noted that the tips definitely bulged with something white. There seemed to be a lot there. Perfect. Next time I saw this type of plant, I would actively hunt it down.

Now, what's next... Whoa, there's a huge mushroom with a purple cap. I pulled it out of the ground and used View Status.

Monster Shroom: Value D. Once grown, it becomes a monster that can ambulate and attack people. It tastes like meat and is regarded as a delicacy.

Cool, cool. I'll take this home with me. Sounds like it'll make good broth.

I held onto the monster shroom and continued my foraging.

Oh, here's an odd mushroom. Small and white and very cute, it looked like something out of a fairytale.

Moro Trogia: Value A. So valuable that successful cultivation could bring a country back from the brink of financial ruin. Bears a striking resemblance to the poisonous mushroom "Al Trogia," which, unbeknownst to many, is much more common. Ingestion causes hallucinogenic effects, inducing intense feelings of euphoria.

Five hundred years ago, it was often crushed, mixed with stimulants, and sold as a narcotic. In more recent times, however, the official practice is to burn them on sight. There are still fanatics and rogue soldiers who privately cultivate them, using them for many purposes, including torture.

Just one mushroom can be used to make a large quantity of the narcotic, so they can be sold at extremely high prices to those who desire them. However, beware of double-crosses or theft.

I stomped down hard and finished up with Baby's Breath, until the dangerous mushroom turned to ash and crumbled.

Title Skill: "Itty-bitty Hero" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Well, I'm glad that finally leveled up. But how is something this dangerous allowed to exist?

If I just left it, or got greedy and picked it, I could unleash a huge catastrophe that could wipe out an entire village. I probably deserved more than just one level. I might have just thwarted a complete disaster!

I was lucky I could view the stats of objects now, or I would have eaten something really terrible. This was way beyond the level of "Oh, hey—maybe I'll develop a resistance to it!" That was the sort of mushroom that could single-handedly turn me into a bad dragon.

Well, I think that's plenty of mushrooms. But if I remember correctly... Ah, there they are. The little red seed thingies I used as pepper. They're really versatile and delicious, so I'll pick a bunch of them. Might as well check them out while I'm here, too.

Piperis: Value B+. One of the most widely used spices, which emits an appetite-stirring aroma.

However, due to the difficulty of its cultivation and widespread old wives' tales that the roots can be made into a panacea, it is rarely found outside the Borderlands. It is at risk of extinction due to over-gathering.

It is highly sought after by nobles with gourmet taste and said to be worth its weight in gold.

Whoa, I had a feeling these were valuable! Doesn't look like the villagers ever come to pick them, though. Is that because there are too many monsters around here? Or maybe they don't even know they're here. Well, whatever, more for me—I'll pick a lot in case someone else comes along.

I also picked up some kind of sweet, magical-looking tree branches, a variety of nice-smelling leaves, a delicious mushroom packed with super shiny spores, and some lettuce-like vegetable with greenish-white leaves.

I got in a brief scuffle with a pack of graywolves on the way home, and with my hands so full I had to fight entirely with my legs. They still didn't give me much trouble—I'd gotten pretty strong. I went back to my cave to deposit the fruits of my foraging, then went back for the graywolf meat.

In the end, my haul consisted of the cracked tortoiseshell pot, a selection of potortoise meats, a glowing light shroom, a paralysis-inducing lightning shroom, the roots of the carnivorous flower, the monster shroom, a bunch of piperis, magictree branches, aroma leaves, a green ball plant, and the meat and pelts of five graywolves.

I'll eat the potortoises today, but then what should I do with all these graywolf steaks? Maybe I could dry them out. I wouldn't say no to some jerky.

PART 7

THE LIGHT SHROOM brightened the interior of my cave quite a bit, and I'd be able to use it as a lamp when the sun set. I was really glad I'd picked that mushroom, since proper lighting was a vital part of interior decorating. Or, well, at least I could see my food while I was eating it. When I went to sleep I could just drape one of the graywolf pelts over the mushroom to turn it off.

I dug a shallow hole near the entrance of the cave and stacked it with dry kindling. I used Baby's Breath to start the flame and set the potortoise shell on top as a cooking pot.

The shell was pretty banged up, but none of the river water leaked out—the damage looked worse than it was, I supposed. I added the whitish-green leaves of the green ball vegetable to my makeshift pot along with some mushrooms, the potortoise meat, and a root from the carnivorous flower for salt.

Yeah, this is looking like real soup! It makes me so nostalgic I might cry.

I fashioned some chopsticks out of branches, slicing them up with my claws. I had Dragon Scales, which meant I could withstand a bit of heat. It was fine if the chopsticks weren't perfect. If all else failed, well, I'd eaten the graywolf meat with my bare hands before, so really this was all just for the aesthetic. My claws were long and my fingers cumbersome, but I wanted to try using my new chopsticks anyway.

I let the soup simmer for a while, then took a bite of the potortoise meat.

Whoa, this is really good! It was sort of like extremely tender chicken. I'd never eaten anything like it, not even in my previous life.

Jeez, if they're all this delicious, I'm gonna have to go hunt more potortoises. Heck, I'll hunt them to extinction. Good thing I'd gotten ten today.

Think how much meat I'd have if I could have kept that Giant Potortoise's body. Although...its flesh was pretty tough. I bet once the potortoises grow up, they get dried out and less tasty. The same went for chickens, I'd heard.

Maybe I should try that yellow-and-black-striped mushroom. What was it

called? Lightning Shroom? Its status said it caused paralysis, but that it tasted good. Hmm...it makes my tongue tingle a bit, but it's got a nice texture. Real crunchy. And it soaks up the potortoise broth really well.

The tip of my tongue went numb and I couldn't feel my hands, but that passed relatively quickly. Dragons were amazing. I mean, I knew that, but it was cool to be reminded.

Gained "Paralysis Resistance" Lv 1.

Excellent, all according to plan.

I decided to taste a bit of everything, adding more ingredients to my soup. I put in more of the green ball leaves and added more water, before getting so frustrated with the chopsticks that I bit them to pieces. I drank directly from the pot after that.

Man! That was delicious! Talk about a feast. There's no way I could go back to being a human after that.

I patted my full belly, basking in the taste of the potortoise. Good thing they had shells, otherwise they'd probably be hunted to extinction by now.



So...the potortoise experiment was a success, but now I had to do something with my mountain of graywolf meat. I couldn't let it spoil, so I decided to go with my earlier plan and try to turn it into jerky.

I cleaned and gutted the graywolves, separating out the bones, organs, and brains, then the meat and fur. I cut the meat into bite-sized pieces, trimming off fat and sinew. I blew a Baby's Breath on a carnivorous flower root to make salt, then massaged that into the meat. The salt would kill bacteria and draw out the moisture, preserving the flesh. There was so much graywolf that I nearly ran out of salt before I was done.

When I was finished, I picked it all up and took it outside. I used Baby's Breath on a tree beside the cave entrance, stripping away the leaves and potential germs from a branch. Then I pierced the meat through the naked branch like a skewer.

This should work, and if it doesn't, I'll try something else next time. I'd be pretty disappointed if all this meat went to waste, though.

Title Skill "Mr. Chef" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Oh, great! Now, the fur...

If I just left the pelts in a heap like that, they'd probably rot. But honestly I had no idea how to preserve animal skins. My best guess was to cut off the fat, cover the hide in salt, and hope that removed enough bacteria and moisture to stop putrefaction.

After that, I wasn't sure. I didn't want a maggot infestation, so I considered just throwing them out. I really wanted a carpet, though. And I *definitely* didn't want to show up to the village totally nude when I finally got Human Transformation.

Well, for the time being I'd use the rest of my salt on the pelts, let the piperis dry outside, and get some rest. Tomorrow I could go on a search for more carnivorous flower roots and spices.

Interlude:

The Girl's Adventure

I WALKED THROUGH the woods alone.

The forest near the village crawled with monsters. I often ventured a short way into the trees to gather mushrooms or medicinal herbs, but I'd never gone this deep before on my own. Marielle would be furious if she knew. No matter—I had no choice but to go.

I probably should have brought backup, but Doz was missing and poor Grantz had just been killed. Rumors about a dragon sighting were circulating—a big one, seen flying deep into the forest. It looked injured, but no one wanted to risk an encounter.

I knew it was dangerous, so I didn't pester them. Besides, if I asked around too much, word would get back to Marielle and she'd put a stop to my adventure before it began.

So, alone it was.

A long time ago, it was forbidden to venture deep into the forest. People thought it would anger the gods who protected the village, but by the time I was born that was considered more of a superstition by most people, though some of the elders still believed it. Marielle was one of the believers, so she didn't look kindly on forest explorers. She was old enough that she took the village's customs very seriously, despite how little and cute she was. Ha, she'd make such a grumpy face if she heard me say that.

I kept my ears open, listening closely to my surroundings as I made my careful way through the forest. It would be okay. After all, I could use magic. I could fight off weak monsters by myself.

From behind me came a rustling in the brush. I whipped around to find an enormous caterpillar—a darkwurm. It was almost as large as I was, and its black squirming body wriggled across the ground towards me.

I was startled, but at the same time I felt relieved. Even I could beat a darkwurm.

“Fireball!”

Flames shot from my staff, blazing toward the darkwurm. It turned tail and ran.

“Phew...”

I let out a sigh of relief as it disappeared from view. Marielle said darkwurms were F Rank monsters and therefore weren’t very dangerous; even regular people could deal with them. I was more than capable of defeating a monster like that.

The most I could do to an E Rank monster was incapacitate it. Doz could take one on his own, though. But the danger level really jumped with D Rank monsters. Everything below that had about as much power as the average adventurer. But D Rank and higher were as strong as at least three humans.

Four skilled adventurers could defeat a C Rank monster, but only if they planned very carefully beforehand. Our village sometimes had to go to the bigger city and ask for help defeating tougher monsters.

If I came across anything higher than a D Rank, I had to take care not to provoke it and run away. If it chased me, my only recourse was to use fire magic and hope that scared it off. But even coming across one was putting my life in danger, and in the forest the odds weren’t exactly low.

So why come to the forest in the first place?

Because when Bälz returned from a fishing trip, he said he’d seen Doz. Doz, who was still missing. Bälz was out by the lake, which was right between the town and the forest, when he felt someone watching him from the woods. He looked up and saw Doz looking out at him from among the trees.

Doz was acting strangely, mumbling to himself. Bälz called out to him and Doz smiled, but then he ran off into the trees like he’d seen something scary. One of his legs dragged behind him. His clothes were in tatters, his face gaunt. The edges of his mouth were tinged blue. He looked very unwell.

Unsurprising, considering how dangerous the forest was for a lone adventurer. And it was very strange to hear that he'd reached the edge of the forest only to turn back.

The rest of the village dismissed Bälz's story as the ramblings of a drunk. They said he probably had one too many while he was out fishing. Bälz *did* like his liquor. Other than that, all his story accomplished so far was adding to the rumors that there were ghosts in the forest. It was easy to explain his story away as a tipsy fisherman who probably just saw a ghost.

Bälz swore he had nothing to drink that day, but no one believed him. A few people even said they'd seen him going into the forest with a bottle. One person said, "He's probably just too embarrassed to admit it was because of his bad habits."

Under normal circumstances, if Doz was known to be alive and wandering the forest, all the young men in the village would form a search party. The people chosen for the search would know they were risking their lives, but our village's motto was "no one left behind." Abandoning someone like this was expressly forbidden.

I'd heard people talk about past search parties many times, the stories repeated like old heroic tales. But now, because of all the rumors floating around, everyone was too afraid to venture into the forest. Doz wasn't popular to begin with either, hence why no one had come forward to suggest forming a search party.

The eyewitness who claimed he'd seen Doz acting strangely, added to the sightings of the giant dragon, meant that no one really knew what was going on in the forest, or what unknown risks they'd be facing. That was the excuse. But I think deep down it left a bitter taste in the villager's mouths to dismiss the whole ordeal.

Honestly, I wasn't sure I believed the people who said they'd seen Bälz leave with alcohol anyway.

I thought he might be telling the truth.

I wasn't sure what had happened to Doz, but Bälz might be right. So that was why I'd decided to go deep into the forest, because if I had just been able to

stop Doz that day, none of this would have happened. If I had talked to Marielle, or tried to convince Grantz not to go, I could've prevented the reckless provocation of the Rock Dragon. I was the only one who had a chance to stop it.

I wanted to believe that Doz wasn't that deep in the forest. He'd been seen close to the village after all, if only briefly. I'd go just a short way in. There weren't any monsters around here too strong for me to handle. Or at least... there shouldn't be.

Chapter 5:
Claybear

PART 1

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since my battle to the death with the potortoises. I spent most of my time quite peacefully, drying piperis, seasoning the jerky, and torching carnivorous flowers for salt.

The jerky was coming along well, but yesterday a group of orangurangs—monsters that looked like red monkeys—came along and stole the entire batch. I woke up early in the morning to a commotion. Stepping outside, I found the evil monkey gang laughing and chittering as they devoured my jerky. I hadn't felt such rage in a long time.

I chased after them, but they were ridiculously fast and I lost them in seconds. After I'd calmed down and was able to think clearly, I realized that a big group like that could definitely kill me. Orangurangs' stats were pretty high. I could take them one-on-one, but fighting that many at once would be suicide.

So I let them have the jerky, and hunted a bunch of graywolves to make another batch. It wasn't so much that I was dying for jerky, more just stubbornness on my part. Still, I was nervous that those darn orangurangs would come back and steal it again. And if they came while I was asleep, there was nothing I could do.

So I got some poisonous plants, boiled them in my tortoiseshell pot, and brewed up a nice, strong poison. Then I dipped each piece of jerky in the concoction. Just imagining those red monkeys writhing in pain filled me with satisfaction. This was the best way to make sure they never came back.

The pelts were done disinfecting and drying out, so I took them down to the lake to wash the salt off. I used Baby's Breath on a tree to burn off the little branches and leaves, making myself a laundry pole. I slung the pelts over it and let them dry. Now I had a perfect rug for my cave house.

I wasn't sure I'd preserved it properly, but it would do for now. I lay down on top of the soft, comfortable pelt. I was working on building up a solid supply of salt and other spices while hunting low-level monsters like graywolves and

horned rabbits, which provided me with food for the day. Lately I only challenged E Rank monsters.

There was no harm in taking it easy, but it meant I hadn't gained a single level in three whole days. My only skill that had improved was Mr. Chef, to Lv 3. Maybe I'd venture out farther than usual today. I wanted a few more pots to store my ingredients—one for meat, one for salt, and one for spices. I needed a new cooking pot as well. I had been so consumed with my desire to avenge my lost jerky that I didn't think things through before using my one and only pot to cook up a batch of poison.

If only getting new pots was simple. I found it was nearly impossible to defeat a potortoise without breaking its shell. Out of the ten I'd killed, only one of the shells had been usable, and even that one was pretty beat up.

I used Roll to explore a part of the forest I'd never been to before, searching for new food sources and anything else I could use as a pot. I ran into a horned rabbit on the way there, but after a little game of tag I managed to take it down.

That bought me a bit of experience. It would be too much of a pain to carry it with me, so I left it and planned to pick it up on my way home.

Is it just me, or was that horned rabbit really fast? True, I hadn't seen much action lately, so my senses were probably a little dulled. I really needed to get my edge back with more challenging battles, something with a little tension—nothing too far above my own rank, though. After the Little Rock Dragon and the Giant Potortoise, I'd had enough of C Rank monsters. Even nine lives wouldn't be enough to keep fighting those guys.

I pondered this as I rolled around, until I heard a strange noise. Suspicious, I paused.

Thump, squish. Thump, squish.

Thump, squish. Thump, squish.

What in the world was that? I mean, it sounded like footsteps but...odd. It must be a monster I'd never come across before, but I couldn't glean anything more than that.

I held my breath and hid myself behind the trees. Then I slowly, slowly made my way towards the sound. And there it was...some kind of huge bear.

Well, it *looked* like a bear, but it *wasn't* a bear. I wasn't actually sure what it was. It was hard to explain, but it almost looked like a model of a bear...like a lump of mud made to look like one.

Uh...at any rate, time to check View Status.

Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 5 cannot provide that information. Target is out of range.

Guess I was a smidge too far out. But it looked dangerous, so I didn't want to get any closer.

“View Status” cannot retrieve target's status; however, it is able to provide information regarding Species.

Hey, I didn't know View Status had such a convenient function. I think I'll go ahead and use it.

“Claybear” Rank D+ Monster. A monster born from the earth. Very powerful with high regenerative abilities.

A D+ Rank monster, huh? So it was the same rank as me. I could definitely take it on, and I bet it'd give me a lot of experience, too. The only downside was that I doubted any amount of grilling or boiling would make it appetizing.

But maybe if I beat it, I can melt it back down to clay and form some pots out of it? Okay, it's decided. I'll destroy it, reshape it, and use it to decorate my home.

PART 2

THE CLAYBEAR still hadn't noticed me. Maybe it was a little slow on the uptake. But I couldn't lose the advantage I'd gained by spotting it first.

Still, I mean, it was a bear-shaped lump of clay. It looked like a half-finished figurine, too ugly to even put on a display shelf. I wasn't sure if its ears and eyes even functioned. Maybe that's why it was so oblivious.

I didn't know any specifics, but I was still going to use everything I had against it. I wasn't going to do something basic like punch it from behind. I needed an opening.

I'd sneak right up behind it, then when the moment was right, I'd pounce. If I attacked when it was eating or relieving itself, I'd get the drop on it. Wait, did it eat?

At any rate, I decided to watch and wait. I didn't mind stalking it for an hour or two if it meant I got experience and some pots out of the deal. I watched the claybear from the brush some distance away. When it moved, I let it pull ahead before slowly beginning to follow. I wasn't worried about losing sight of it; it definitely stood out. Plus, its footsteps were loud.

It walked, I followed. When it turned around, I hit the ground. It walked, I followed. I spent three hours tailing the claybear.

I was getting hungry. Maybe I'd go back the way I came and eat that horned rabbit I left lying there. I'd watched the claybear for three hours, but it hadn't done anything remarkable. It just trudged along, turned around and went back the way it came, then repeated the process. I was beginning to doubt this thing was even alive.

A darkwurm slowly crawled across the claybear's path. They ignored each other.

Wow. Even the darkwurm didn't see it as a living creature.

Now all I see when I look at the claybear is a lump of mud. This whole thing is stupid. I'll just punch it in the head and go home.

I stood up, slightly numb from crouching for so long. That was when it happened. The claybear spun swiftly, then slammed its earthen fist into the darkwurm's back as it passed by. It crushed the wurm so fast it didn't even have the chance to scream, its insides spraying out in every direction.

My jaw dropped and I stood there, staring. The claybear knelt over the squashed darkwurm, and its stomach split into an enormous maw that ripped into the wurm. Blood splattered as the claybear sloppily devoured it.

Okay, that is not a bear! It has no right to call itself a bear! I won't let it! Rename yourself!

But this was no time to get flustered. I had to calm down...calm down! This was exactly what I was waiting for—the claybear was eating! All creatures let their guards down when they were satisfying their biological needs, and this monster was no exception. Or at least I really hoped that was true.

To be fair, I didn't want to fight it. But I really needed a pot to finish decorating my humble abode.

Who knew when a human might come across my cave? Then they'd say, "Hey, this place looks nice—dragons must be pretty smart! I'd sure like to become a dragon's friend!" I needed material from the claybear to make that happen.

I charged through the brush using Roll, rushing the claybear from behind while it ate and tackling it with all my might.

"Beeyah!"

The claybear's back caved in. It let out an incredibly un-bear-like scream and spit the remains of the darkwurm out of its mouth. I spun in place, aiming for the dent in the claybear's back.

Hi-yah! Take another one!

"Beeyah!"

The claybear rolled, slamming into the base of a huge tree. But I wasn't letting up yet. The claybear didn't seem to comprehend what had happened, so I launched a third punch at it. I kicked off the ground and aimed for its stomach.

“B-beeyah!”

I smashed it hard into a tree. I sensed the claybear’s mouth-stomach opening and swiftly canceled my Roll skill. I stretched out my curled limbs, kicked off its shoulders and used that momentum to gain some distance, landing with both feet planted.

The giant mouth gaping from its stomach seemed to stare at me. This was dangerous. If I didn’t get away, it would chew me up and spit me out.

Surely the three punches I landed must’ve done *some* damage. The claybear’s arms were barely hanging on and its sides were all caved in. I needed to land one more punch to really finish it off, but it was difficult to plan my moves against a creature I knew nothing about. At least I was close enough for a Status check now.

Species: Claybear

Status: Fury

Lv: 25/40

HP: 57/178

MP: 100/100

Attack: 75

Defense: 136

Magic: 56

Agility: 65

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Golem: Lv —

Earth Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Soul Contamination: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 6

Transform: Lv 2

Regenerate: Lv 4

Clay: Lv 4

Sandstorm: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Clod: Lv 3

Basically the same level as me. Its defense was on the high side, but my attacks were still doing damage. Leveling up Roll had been a good plan after all.

I didn't want a repeat of the potortoise debacle. Not only did I barely do them any damage at all, but they could completely recover with just one Rest. The claybear's Bite Lv 6 was what worried me. Good thing I hadn't just charged it head on like I'd wanted to at first. It definitely would've killed me right away.

I did put it in Fury, but that wasn't a surprise. Anyone would be angry if they got attacked during lunch.

"Beee-yaaaah!"

The claybear's stomach-mouth opened up and howled. Instantly, its body puffed back up to its original shape, its dangling arms regenerating. That would be its Regenerate skill. Another aspect of high defense tactics. Apparently everybody and their mom in this forest had healing abilities around here lately except me. I had toiled endlessly trying to learn recovery magic, but was cruelly turned away from that path after being tempted by Human Transformation. *I'd*

make them all pay.

PART 3

THE CLAYBEAR finished healing itself with Regenerate, then started flailing around with its brand new arms, like it was testing them out. It stomped around loudly. Was it trying to intimidate me? If so, it was definitely about to make its move.

As expected, the claybear raised its arms and rushed me. Quickly, I used View Status to see how much its MP had dropped.

Species: Claybear

Status: Fury

Lv: 25/40

HP: 159/178

MP: 82/100

Its HP, originally at 57, had jumped all the way up to 159. Regenerate gained it back about 100 HP, and it had enough MP left to use Regenerate *four* more times. If it came to a straight up brawl, I'd run out of steam first. I wanted to finish it off quickly, but its HP and defense were too high for that. Three direct hits using Roll hadn't been enough.

I needed to pull out all the stops on enemies with high defense, but my strongest attack was Meteorite, and I wasn't confident I could lift the claybear high enough. It was twice my size.

I might be able to use Breath until I was nearly dead like I did with the Giant Potortoise, but if I threw the claybear up into the air and aimed Breath at him, it'd probably just crush me to smithereens in midair. In hand-to-hand combat, it had every advantage over me. I was faster and had a higher attack score, but even if I got the first strike, its defense would force me into a prolonged fistfight. Its stamina advantage was overwhelming.

I'd only managed to land those three punches in the first place because of my ambush. The claybear's defense, its build, and the sheer mass of all that clay in its body meant any more head-on hits either wouldn't connect or wouldn't matter. And of course, it always had Regenerate.

A long-distance attack wouldn't be strong enough. If I set its body on fire, the clay would scorch and harden and I wouldn't be able to make a pot out of it. Then this whole fight would be pointless.

My staring contest with the claybear continued—not with its false head, with the gaping mouth in its stomach. Okay, one last skill check and I'd come up with a strategy.

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 6

Transform: Lv 2

Regenerate: Lv 4

Clay: Lv 4

Sandstorm: Lv 1

Bite Lv 6 was terrifying. I really didn't want to experience those teeth. I wasn't sure if I could inflict damage anywhere but its torso, but I couldn't let myself get too near its stomach.

The Transform skill caught my attention. What if I beat it but then it grew a bunch of extra parts and transformed itself into something else? Seriously, how could they even call this thing a bear? I think the world owed bears everywhere a heartfelt apology!

I wasn't sure what Clay or Sandstorm were, which meant I didn't know how to counter them. Should I use this chance to leave and come back with a better strategy? *Nah, maybe that's being a bit too chicken.*

If I was too cautious, I might miss out on my best chance to attack. There was

no such thing as a totally safe battle strategy, anyway. I couldn't let myself get bogged down by everything I didn't know—I was in danger either way. I needed to maximize my advantages, but still remain flexible. At this point my plan was: don't get eaten by that stupid giant mouth, and circle around behind. Best-case scenario, after that I could start whittling down its HP.

In RPGs they always say not to let your HP go too low before using your recovery magic. No point in conserving MP if you were too dead to use it. I wondered if I could get the claybear to make that mistake and run through its MP quickly? Nah, probably not. That was too big a gamble with my life on the line.

The fact was, I just didn't have any kind of skills strong enough to defeat it in one blow while it was distracted while casting Regeneration.

My mind raced with possibilities. And while I was thinking, the claybear acted. Fangs appeared from its large, gaping stomach-mouth.

Why the heck does it have so many teeth?! Looks more like a shark than a bear! In that moment, I committed to a plan. I'd aim for its torso, which made up the bulk of it. But from the back, rather than the front.

I used Roll to dodge the claybear's new assault, circling around it. I was already fast, but when I used Roll I was practically a blur. The claybear hesitated and I used that to my advantage, tackling it hard.

"Beee-yaaaah!"

The claybear crouched, then swiftly swung a heavy arm my way. I dodged, spinning around behind it again.

C'mon, c'mon! You think you can chase me when I've got Lv 4 Roll? Go ahead and try. I'm gonna keep attacking from behind until I think of something better. Heh, it's whirling around looking confused. Even the bear head is spinning around. Where the heck are its eyes, anyway? Oh, there's an opening!

I used Roll to launch myself once more at his back, then beat a hasty retreat.

That's called a hit and run, ladies and gentlemen! Whoa, that was a close one. Its reflexes are getting better. Heh heh. I was overthinking it before, but this bear's not such a big deal after all.

I hadn't expected to land this many blows. I thought I'd have to figure out the claybear's weaknesses, but this was pretty effective. I might be able to finish it just like this.

It kept raising its arms to attack, but it was easy to evade. And even if it did happen to hit me, I doubted it would do much damage. As long as I avoided a Bite from that stupidly large mouth, I would be fine.

All right, time to circle behind again. *C'mon, c'mon. Hurry up and use Regenerate already. Huh?*

"Beeeee-yaaah!"

The claybear screamed and slammed both of its hands against the ground. At first I thought it was throwing in the towel, but then clouds of dust rose. Ugh, it was using Sandstorm. Guess this wouldn't be over as easily as I thought. Maybe I should just back away quietly. I didn't want to risk being blinded by that cloud of dust and then chomped on. I couldn't get anywhere near him until the storm cleared.

I still had the advantage, though. I'd just go wait in a safe place for now.

PART 4

BUT WHEN THE Sandstorm finally cleared, I blinked in disbelief. A cluster of huge spikes poked from the claybear's back. *What the heck? How did it do that?! That's against the rules! Seriously, why is it called a bear? This is clearly protection against Roll, right? Isn't this a little too convenient?*

This probably messed up its mobility, but the spikes were definitely meant to discourage attacks from its blind spot. It left me only one option: charging from the front. How much MP did it have left?

Species: Claybear

Status: Fury

Lv: 25/40

HP: 137/178

MP: 34/100



Oh, wow, its MP was way lower. Its HP must've gone up because it used Regenerate during the Sandstorm, but I couldn't figure out why its MP was so low now.

Let's say it used Regenerate twice. It costs 18 MP, so that would be a total of 36. Maybe a combo of Sandstorm and Transform ate away the other 30 MP?

That made sense. Now it wouldn't be able to use Transform again very easily, and only had enough MP left for one more Regenerate. I was starting to see a path to victory...the only problem was, how to attack? I'd made good progress, so charging in from the front with hand-to-hand combat wasn't a terrible idea, but it still had Bite Lv 6...

Its back was covered with clay spikes, and its front had the gaping, shark-toothed mouth. I could probably knock its bear-head clean off its neck, but I doubted that would make a difference. The claybear hadn't tried to defend any part of its body except its torso.

If I was going to attack from the front, I couldn't do it with a simple move like Roll. It was fast, but I'd just end up right in the claybear's mouth.

I'd just have to keep punching while evading Bite. If the claybear had a hard shell like the tortoises I could use Meteorite, but I just didn't think this body would break the same way.

I clenched my fists and ran straight toward it. It raised both its arms in a fighting stance to welcome me, and the huge mouth in the center of its stomach opened wide, baring its fangs. The claybear swung its thick right arm down right at me. I raised my hands to block, but then its left arm rushed at me, too.

I parried the swing with my tail, throwing the claybear's trajectory way off course and slamming the back of its left hand into the ground. The recoil from blocking with my tail sent me flying into the air.

"Beee-yaah!"

Its stomach-mouth opened, trying to bite me in midair. I landed a kick right above its mouth and tried to launch myself backwards. My right leg hit the claybear's solid body—and stuck there. Or, more accurately, it got *swallowed*. I

tried to pull it out, but it just kept sinking in deeper and deeper.

He used Transform!

I kicked against the stomach-mouth's fangs with my other foot, using that leverage to pull my right leg out of its body. I sailed backwards, but not fast enough to avoid a Bite attack, which caught me right in the stomach.

"Raaaar!"

I spread my wings and flew backwards, putting distance between us so he wouldn't pursue me. I landed, crashing to my knees and clutching my stomach. My scales had gotten ripped off, the flesh exposed. I could walk, but when I checked my Status my condition was now Bleeding (Slight).

I had to be careful with my HP. I might be able to withstand two more shallow Bites, if I was lucky.

Darn it, darn it! Everything was going so smoothly, until one little mistake put me in a terrible position.

If using Transform drained the rest of the claybear's MP, I still had some hope. I did land a hit on its torso, even if it was a light kick. It should be on the verge of death by now.

Species: Claybear

Status: Fury

Lv: 25/40

HP: 122/178

MP: 19/100

Not only did I barely do any damage, but it still had enough MP to use one last Regenerate. I considered giving up on the clay and using Baby's Breath—but then all of this would have been for nothing.

I've just gotta prepare myself. It's a battle to the death between equal ranks and equal levels. I need to take some risks.

“Beee-yaah!”

The claybear howled as it ran for me, swinging its thick arms to attempt a grab. But for whatever reason, it didn’t seem to want to finish me off with its arms. It seemed it was trying to hold me still to use Bite again. If that was it, I could anticipate its next move.

I’d dodge, parry with my tail, then dodge again.

I knew I was right; its arm attacks were only meant to hold onto me. It only actually attacked with Bite—all the rest of its moves were pure defense.

I whipped the claybear’s left arm with my tail and flew wide to the right. It pursued me, stretching its right arm out. I kicked off the ground and spun backwards into the air, grabbing at its arm. Then, I spread my wings and shot a blast of Baby’s Breath straight down for a burst of altitude.

I could use Meteorite to knock it down... Wait, no, that wouldn’t be enough to finish its HP. If it was still alive, it would just use Regenerate. I had to end this fight right now.

I folded my wings and dropped toward the claybear like a stone. The impact would be rough, but I knew I could withstand it.

“Raaaaaaaaaar!”

“Beeee-yaah!”

The claybear looked up at me and screamed.

Shut up with “beeyah, beeyah” already. You’re not a real bear, and that’s not even close to the sound a bear makes in the first place! Why do you keep lying to yourself?!

I slammed into its fake bear’s head and arm, pulverizing them, clouds of dust swirling out in all directions. The impact roared through my body, throwing me backwards. I rolled across the forest floor, landing on my back, limbs spread like a starfish.

Gained Normal Skill “Nutcracker” Lv 1.

Nutcracker, huh? Couldn’t you think up a cooler name than that? Although I guess that was kind of what I did.

Gained 150 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 150 Experience Points.

“Young Plague Dragon” Lv 31 has become Lv 33.

Phew, thank goodness. I hated to admit it, but for once I was happy to hear the Divine Voice. I had no idea what I would’ve done if that fake bear was still alive.

I sat up and noted the pieces of the claybear scattered around. There was even a crack in the ground. *Wow.*

The recoil was too intense for me to use that maneuver very often, but it would be a good trump card to keep in my pocket. Seriously though, my body was aching. I couldn’t do any more hunting today, but I could at least collect the clay from the claybear. I would gather it all up, go home to my cave, and start making my pots.

PART 5

IT TOOK SEVERAL TRIPS to get all the clay from the claybear back to my cave. I didn't really need so much, but I decided to take it all just in case. Having too much wouldn't hurt, and if I ended up with a ton left over maybe I'd try my hand at sculpting a statue. Not like I had anything better to do.

I piled all the clay below the tree where my jerky was hanging. Time to start sculpting. I began kneading the clay and made something that resembled a large cauldron. Then I heaped water, dirt, and some more clay inside of it and mixed it all together.

Since there was so much of it, it was hard work. I couldn't have done it with my human body, and it was even rough on my current form.

I might even be able to paint the walls inside the cave with the clay. It was way stickier than normal clay, but I could thin it out with dirt.

After I was done mixing it, I sculpted the slurry into a pot shape. I made lots and lots *and lots* of mistakes. My stiff dragon arms and long claws made it impossible to achieve a neat shape. Argh, If I was going to go to the trouble of making these pots, I wanted them to look at least slightly pot-like.

The sun set as I worked, but I stubbornly kept on. My battle with the claybear had exhausted me, but strangely, I didn't want to sleep. I ignored my heavy eyelids, just kneaded and crushed, crushed and kneaded.

Halfway through, I bit down my bothersome claws to stop them from getting in the way. My fingertips bled, but I kept kneading the clay.

By the time the sun rose, and after a lot of trial and error, I'd made a beautiful pot. The trick was crafting the bottom and sides separately, then attaching them.

It was perfect. Seriously perfect. *All right, I'm going to mass produce pots just like this one.*

Gained Title Skill "Ceramic Artisan" Lv 1.

Aw, Divine Voice. Lay off the compliments, you're gonna make me blush.

Looking up, I spotted a group of those scoundrel red monkeys—the orangurangs. They were watching me, and I had a feeling it was the same gang as before. I glared back at them and they immediately disappeared into the forest. They were probably after the jerky. I couldn't let my guard down.

How many pots did I need? One for the spices, one for the meat, and one for the salt. And I might need more later on, so I might as well make ten of them.

I ignored the sound of my belly rumbling and continued sculpting. My technique improved with every pot I made.

Hey, I might be a master artisan here. This is super fun.

I made ten pots, and my title skill Ceramic Artisan went up to Lv 2. I'd hit my first goal, so I had a break and took some jerky off the tree to try. It was actually really good. *I'm so glad I found that salt. I bow down to you, o great carnivorous flower!*

While I was eating, I sensed someone watching me. I turned, only to see those monkeys again. They'd totally gotten a taste for my jerky. *Shoo, shoo! Get out of here!*

I shot them a look, and once again they disappeared into the forest.

I don't have time to deal with you right now. But when I do, I'll let you eat as much as you want. Poison, that is.

After my meal, I decided to try sculpting a cooking pot. Or maybe two—one for eating and one for brewing up poison. And I'd surely need spares, so I might as well make an even five. A couple might break at the firing stage, after all.

The cooking pots brought my Ceramic Artisan skill up to Lv 3. I wondered idly if I was an artist in my past life. My genius was simply frightening.

I gathered up dried wood and set my large cauldron on it. I opened the top and shot in a puff of Baby's Breath. I repeated the skill until I had a mountain of ash. I put the storage jars and cooking pots inside, shooting in another Baby's Breath on top. I wasn't exactly sure how hot to make it, so I was prepared to end up with a couple cracked pots, but shockingly, none of them broke. Maybe the claybear's clay was especially durable.

When the pots began to glow white, I stopped Baby's Breath and piled dirt on top to extinguish the fire. When it cooled, I pulled the pots from the ash and washed the soot and dirt off them in the river.

These look pretty good! Honestly, this went way better than I was expecting.

Back in the cave, I transferred the salt, spices, and meat to their new containers. I lined up the jars and cooking pots and looked around—my cave was beginning to look pretty cheerful. I felt good.

I still had some clay, so maybe I really would try a sculpture next. Once I painted the interior walls and made it all look homey, maybe I could make some bricks and arrange them inside the cave. I could sculpt them from the leftover clay and fire it all with Baby's Breath. Seemed like tough work, but rewarding.

I had a feeling I'd be holed up in my cave for a while. As for food... *Well, I can make do with the jerky for now.*

Chapter 6:

Venom Princess Lacerta

PART 1

MY HOME RENOVATIONS were finally almost complete. I spent three days tidying up, preparing the walls and floor, and sweeping out all the dust. I piled claybear bricks against the wall and lay graywolf fur carpeting on the floor. I put my handcrafted cooking pots and containers in the corner.

I set stone sculptures on either side of the cave entrance. The clumsiness of my first attempts was long gone; during those three days of crafting, my Ceramic Artisan skill jumped to Lv 4.

Now I was totally prepared for a human caller. *Won't someone show up soon? Once they see such a perfect abode, there's no way they'll think I'm some violent dragon.*

But in the meantime, I had to get more food. I'd eaten all the jerky I had stored up, and even all the meat that hadn't dried all the way yet.

If I spent another day working, I'd be left with just the poisoned jerky I made for the orangurangs. They showed up again briefly, but once they saw nothing was left on the trees, they left disappointed. *Sorry, losers, I ate it all myself.*

It was a good thing I hadn't left the poisoned jerky out yet. It was hard to tell apart from the good stuff, and I could have easily eaten it accidentally if it had gotten mixed in. Luckily, the color was slightly different, so I could tell if I looked closely.

So after three days inside my cave, I set out on a hunt again. I was really letting my battle practice slide, in favor of renovating. *I guess I tend to hyperfixate.*

I had no reason to push myself this time. I'd just take it easy and hunt some graywolves. I was craving more jerky.

I was Lv 33 and evolution was drawing nearer, but I still hadn't racked up any good deeds. I needed to get on that before my next transformation. Laying waste to that narcotic mushroom didn't really count. For now, though, there was no need to do anything but hunt easy monsters.

And who knew? Maybe the Mr. Chef and Ceramic Artisan skills would be enough to get me off the Evil Dragon path. I could turn myself into a human and live out the rest of my days as an artist. Ha! I bet that would annoy the Divine Voice. It always came off as pretty chill; part of me wanted to see it completely lose its cool and start flooding me with bright red warning text or something. The rest of me was still kind of scared of it.

I was glad I'd gathered so much salt and piperis. I had one pot full of each, which would probably last me at least a year. I was set for seasonings, at least!

My plan was to try to raise my title skills a little each day, and also look for chances to do good, until I gained enough levels to evolve. I'd hunt just as many monsters as I needed to eat. If I got the next evolution wrong, there would be no going back, so I had to be very careful. The Divine Voice had proved itself a manipulator and a liar. I wasn't going to be deceived by its sweet words again.

As I walked, I used View Status on the forest vegetation. I found nothing but F Value plants, none of them particularly interesting. It was kind of disappointing, really. I'd wanted to try making a potion or something.

Then I spotted some beautiful bright red flowers. I could pull them up by the roots and plant them around the entrance of my cave. Yeah, my next goal could be gardening!

I reached out my hand to use View Status, but some kind of black lump jumped out at me from the brush, sharp fangs aimed right for my undefended arm.

I knocked it aside reflexively, putting some distance between us and dropping into a fighting stance. The thing was a black lizard about two feet long. It must have been hiding in the grass watching me, waiting for a chance to strike.

Species: Venom Princess Lacerta

Status: Normal

Lv: 19/35

HP: 86/108

MP: 117/127

Attack: 52

Defense: 58

Magic: 75

Agility: 128

Rank: D-

Special Skills:

Special Venom: Lv —

Poison Belt: Lv 6

Scale: Lv 1

Undercover: Lv 2

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Poison Immunity: Lv —

Paralysis Immunity: Lv —

Normal Skills:

Venom Fangs: Lv 3

Venom Claws: Lv 2

Paralyzing Venom Tongue: Lv 3

Double Poison: Lv 2

Roll: Lv 3

Clay Gun: Lv 4

Cure Poison: Lv 1

Surprise Attack: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Bizarre Gastronomist: Lv 5

Poison Master: Lv 4

Cunning: Lv 3

Chicken Runner: Lv 4

What the heck? It's so fast, and those poison skills seem like bad news! This thing's beyond my level!

Nah, hang on, maybe it's closer to an equal match up. It might just look stronger than it is. Its other stats are low, and even though it has a ton of skills, almost all of them are poison-based. There are probably lots of circumstances where it doesn't have the right skills for the job.

Having dodged my counterattack, the black lizard darted back into the grass and vanished.

Did it run away? No, it's too soon for that.

I strained my ears. It was probably hiding—it did have the title skill Cunning, after all.

A suspicious rustle in the grass came from my blind spot. I turned toward the sound, braced for it to come jumping out at me. Something did, hitting me with a little tap.

What was that? A pellet of dirt?

Suddenly I remembered the skill Clay Gun. It got me. That was definitely a trap to lure my attention.

I felt an intense heat from my shoulder; it had circled around behind me and latched on. *I'm an idiot.* Standing around here following the sound of pellets was exactly what it wanted!

I didn't have time to think. I slammed my shoulder into the tree.

"Giiii!"

The black lizard let out a scream as it was shaken loose and hit the ground. I tried to follow it, but I was distracted by the heat in my shoulder.

"Gssh, gssh, giiiiiiiish!"

It laughed at me and fled at a frightening speed.

What, it's just running away? Or is it gonna hide somewhere? And why does my shoulder hurt so much? I have Poison Resistance Lv 3! The wound felt horrible, and it was radiating through my body like something was spreading.

Resistance Skill "Poison Resistance" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Oh, it went up! That's good, at least.

Still, I might be in trouble. The Venom Princess Lacerta had that odd skill—what was it? Special Venom? My shoulder had gone completely numb.

PART 2

THE WAY THE BLACK LIZARD fled our battle prematurely was making me anxious. I glanced at my swollen shoulder with a sinking feeling—I had a feeling that this wound was much worse than any natural regeneration could take care of.

What should I do? Maybe I could make a tourniquet to prevent the poison from circulating further into my body, and then suck out as much poison from the wound as I could? There was no way I could do that with my fangs, though.

Guess I'll check my stats, then.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Poison α (Major)

Lv: 33/40

HP: 140/149

MP: 143/143

My status is "Poison α?" What is that? I've never seen a condition like that before. Is it different from a regular poison somehow?

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

Ugh! Useless!

I need to do something! Should I look for an antidote? I couldn't remember seeing any plants like that, but what other choice did I have?

I had to think. I'd definitely never seen anything about specific types of poisons in the View Status descriptions, and the Divine Voice was avoiding giving me any information on Poison α. But there had to be some way to get information out of it.

I could check for details about the black lizard's species on View Status.

Maybe the explanation would include something about its venom.

I'd have to find it, but...wait, maybe just seeing the monster up close once was enough to pull up the information?

All right, give me the details on Venom Princess Lacerta! Come on!

Venom Princess Lacerta: D Rank monster

A monster which emits venom then flees, waiting until its prey is exhausted, then returns to collect the meat. It consumes highly poisonous objects and synthesizes them into strong venom inside of its body.

The creature also secretes body fluid able to neutralize the effects of its own poison. If caught, it will offer the antidote as a trade for its freedom.

Oh, there it is. Well, it's there, but it sucks. I really ran into something dangerous here. I have to negotiate with a lizard or I'm gonna die? Well, at least now I know what to do. I'll find it, catch it, show it I mean business, and make it cure me.

It was really fast, though, and a fellow practitioner of Roll. This would be difficult. Still, since becoming a dragon I'd fought and run away over and over again. I was confident that I understood the psychology of a creature running from battle.

Luckily, there was a plant nearby that had regenerative properties—Rest Grass: Value E. I pulled up a handful and wrapped it around my shoulder. At the very least, it would delay the poison from traveling to the rest of my body.

Searching for the black lizard would be difficult in my current state. I wasn't particularly confident in my sense of smell or hearing. I had no idea where it had gone, plus it was incredibly quick and totally silent.

I thought back to when it poisoned me. First, it sent out that clay pellet as a distraction. That was probably its Clay Gun skill. I wasn't able to resist following the arc of it with my eyes, and that was when the lizard circled behind to attack.

It probably realized a normal attack wouldn't work on me, so it purposely missed with Clay Gun. If it had aimed right at me, I could have easily evaded and turned my attention to the source of the shots.

This wasn't some ordinary lizard I had to negotiate with. My life was on the line here, and I could be dealing with something much smarter than me.

I needed to stop dwelling on my failure and figure out a way to find the lizard. Then I'd force it into a race using our Roll skills. I could corner it at the cliff, the same one I crossed to escape the huge spider and defeat the Giant Potortoise. I was starting to feel a growing kinship with that cliff...although using the local geography to your advantage wasn't exactly an uncommon battle tactic.

Catching the lizard through ordinary means would prove impossible. It was just too fast, and it would surely disappear the moment I made a move toward it. I had to make a bold gamble. If I failed, I would never find it again. I'd either have to make an antidote myself or cut off my own arm.

I supposed as a last-ditch effort I could go into the village and find someone to cure me. They'd probably try to kill me on sight, but if I really ran out of options it might be worth a try.

At the moment, it seemed most likely that I'd have to cut off my own arm, which would be painful and terrifying and would probably earn me another bizarre title skill. But that had to be Plan B. I was going to evolve soon anyway, and since evolution changed my physical form, my arm might fully regenerate. But I needed to prepare myself for the worst-case scenario.

Having thought it all through, it was time to get started on my plan. To track down this black lizard I'd have to rely on something truly ingenious.

The black lizard had run off in one direction, and I ran in the opposite.

PART 3

GOING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION seemed counterintuitive, but since I'd already lost sight of my quarry, it was my best bet. If the black lizard had really wanted to flee from battle, it would have activated Roll. I'd done the same thing myself a ton of times, and I was pretty sure I was right.

But fleeing didn't make sense in this case. As far as the lizard was concerned, this would be an easy victory. I was closer to death than I ever had been before; it had the distinct advantage.

Therefore, its goal had to be something other than running away. It must be somewhere nearby, waiting for the poison to spread through my body. It wouldn't want to lose sight of me; if I ran away from it, I could get it to chase me.

The best strategy for the lizard would be to hide, mark its target, then stay at a reasonable distance and keep an eye on me. If I started to run, it would have to give chase—losing me would mean the risk it had taken attacking me was all for nothing. I'd be screwed if the black lizard possessed some kind of innate ability to sense its prey, but I didn't see anything like that among its skills. Still, I was playing a dangerous game. I didn't fully understand all its skills, so I was taking a gamble. But this was my best play.

I ran to an open area to try to spot the lizard. If I failed, I'd be left with only bad options—search for some anti-venom, flee to the village for treatment, or cut off my own arm. That was it.

So I'd pretend to run away, and when it rushed me I'd double back and go after it as fast as I could.

The lizard was clever. I knew that if it sensed even a hint of danger, it would run away for real. So I needed to stop wasting time running simulations. It was time to put my guard up and run. It was time to play hide and seek.

The lizard might be faster than me, but my Roll skill was better—it was my signature move, after all. I'd been using it since I was born. That meant my pride

was on the line here. I couldn't lose.

I ran for the cliff, where the grass and trees began to thin out.

I couldn't use Roll yet. If I moved too fast, the black lizard might sense some danger, and my cautious foe would give up and leave, taking the antidote with it. I needed to let it think it had a chance to catch up.

All right, this should be good.

I stopped out in the open, did an about-face, and raced off in the opposite direction. I kicked off the ground and dove into Roll. As the world spun around me, I carefully checked my surroundings. *Not here. Not here. I don't see it.*

Did I screw up? Did the black lizard already run away?

The wind blew cold on my scales as I spun to a halt. Would I have to cut off my arm after all? I glanced around wildly, panic rising.

There it was. A little flash of black in my vision, desperately trying to run away from me. Thank God, my instincts had been right. Now I couldn't let it get away from me.

Should I just Roll over it? No, I had to catch it alive. That was way tougher than just a clean kill.

I quickly closed the gap between us and swooped in to grab it, but just before my claws reached it, it dove into forward somersault and curled its body up for Roll.

Even if my skill level was higher, the black lizard's Roll was incredibly fast. It got further and further away from me, the open terrain letting it move even faster than before.

But I hadn't lost yet. I just had to figure out what to do next.

Since there was little brush in the area, this was purely a battle of speed, so I couldn't let up on the gas pedal. I had to choose a path that was smooth enough for easy movement, watch my footing, and beware of trees and monsters.

Time to see just what this lizard's Roll Lv 3 was capable of.

My Roll was Lv 4. I'd smashed into all sorts of objects as I rolled around trying to escape from that giant spider taranturouge. *I'm gonna drive you to the left and force you on a difficult route, lizard!*

Just as I expected, the black lizard's speed dropped as more trees came into view.

Oh, problems? *We're gonna hit monsters soon, buddy. Hmm? What happened to Chicken Runner Lv 4, huh?*

I was supremely confident in my ability to win in a battle of Roll. I'd been in this dilemma many times before, and every time I'd emerged victorious.

I'll show you what real speed is!

PART 4

THE BLACK LIZARD was forced to slow slightly, but it still zigzagged its way steadily through the trees. It darted between obstacles and feinted to shake me off, yet it never lost its footing.

It still wasn't panicking, despite this encounter going way off the usual script. Staying calm was easy for a monster like that because it knew exactly how powerful it was. Enemies like that were dangerous. If it were me, I would've probably lost my cool right away and pushed myself too hard.

I bet the black lizard would master Roll way faster than me, too. But it hadn't beaten me yet. If I aimed for a place with lots of trees, unsteady footing, and a lot of monsters, it would have to slow down. And if it kept losing battles, I'd win the war.

I just had to keep track of its direction, speed, and tempo as it rushed past obstacles—then I'd be able to predict its next move. No matter how complex the terrain proved to be, I wouldn't lose it.

I saw the exact moment it had to make a choice. It couldn't keep its speed up and also make it around those three trees up ahead without decelerating. Neither of us could.

From my experience, there was a big difference between chasing and being chased. If I let the black lizard go, I'd only have worst-case scenarios left. If I caught it, I'd make it cure me, but I wouldn't let it get away after. Once it healed me, I'd turn it into experience points right there on the spot. And I was sure it knew that, too.

Panic and anxiety were never an advantage.

The black lizard feared death, while I was worried whether my arm would grow back or not. For the moment, I had the mental advantage.

When we reached terrain where it would be easy to make bad choices, I carefully watched the black lizard's mistakes and learned from them. I wouldn't make the same ones. I had the upper hand.

We were about eight meters apart when the black lizard lost its confidence and slowed. It quickly tried to speed up again and leave me in the dust, but it was clearly shaken. It kept messing up more and more.

I slowed down, maintaining the same distance between us. There was no reason to rush. I'd chase it to the cliff and then catch it.

Normal Skill "Roll" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

Oh, it went up! There's no way I'll lose now. All thanks to my trusty partner Roll.

The cliff was coming up fast now.

Just as the black lizard made a wide turn, I shot in and got within five meters of it. *If you don't slow down, you'll run into a monster and really be in trouble!*

Another meter closer. *Yeah, the terrain looks rough, but if you make little jumps you can just barely clear it. If you keep rolling around things to avoid them, you're going to lose!*

Another meter. *No, don't speed up there! You can get over that area without going any faster! You'll get a speeding ticket at this rate.*

All right, three meters! I reached the goal! What did you think of my flawless performance? Yep, no one else even comes close to my mastery of Roll.

Too bad for you, black lizard. If only we'd met after you'd had more time to grow, you could have been a formidable rival Roll-user.

Huh? Why did it slow down all of a sudden? Did it realize it wouldn't be able to outrun me and give up?

"Gsssshhh!"

A barrage of brown pellets came hurling at me from the rolling black lizard. It was the bullet attack again, Clay Gun.

Pretty fancy, even with its accuracy low from being shot while rolling. That just scattered them randomly, making them even harder to avoid.

I'd been so excited to fight this lizard with my signature move that I'd gotten sloppy. *Now what? What do I do now?*

Calm down. Just make a wide arc around to the right...

My consciousness flickered off for a moment, then I found myself lying on my back, staring up at the sky. I had a fleeting impression of how vast the world was and how insignificant I was in comparison. I couldn't help but laugh.

It took me a few seconds to realize what had happened. The sudden counterattack had thrown me off guard, and I'd lost control of my Roll and slammed into a tree. *Yep, that sure happened.*

I sat up and saw the black lizard scurrying away. *Well, you got me. I never expected that you could use Clay Gun and Roll at the same time. I tip my hat to you. My compliments.*

Should I just let it go? Let it go and lose an arm? This is ridiculous!

Even if someone told me it'd grow back next week, I'd still have to cut off my arm! There was no way I was doing that.

I'd been too confident. I hadn't been honest about the risks and overestimated my abilities. I was just too cocky, wasting my time trying to drive it to the cliff in the first place. I should've just tackled it from behind and taken care of it right there.

I was an idiot! A stupid idiot! I let a stupid game of tag go to my head, and ended up knocked unconscious by a simple counterattack!

I curled into a ball and recklessly took off in the fastest Roll I could manage.

Right, left, right! I'm going so fast I won't be able to dodge all the trees in front of me, but I don't care! I won't slow down! I'll slam into that tree and knock it over! I don't care if I get hurt in the process, I can take it!

Why was I trying to show off how fast I could run anyway? *I can take some damage, so why not push it down the most dangerous path!*

I used the trail the black lizard left behind as it rolled... *No, I won't. I'll follow it and make my own path. Our bodies are completely different, after all. Instead of relying on a trail, I'll focus on Roll and make this a real race.*

PART 5

I KEPT THE ROLLING black lizard in my sights as I focused on moving as fast as I could. I made deep tracks in the dirt and blasted through trees as I charged aggressively forward.

No more Mr. Nice Dragon. I didn't even care if I caught it alive anymore. I'd just run it over at full speed. *Hope one blow doesn't kill you, black lizard. Even if it takes everything I've got, I'd rather take you down with me than let you get away.*

The closer I got, the faster it moved. I charged right into anything and everything and took down whatever was unlucky enough to cross my path. Just a glance in my direction would be enough for the lizard to see it—it if slowed even slightly, it would mean certain death.

But no matter how fast you go, there's no way you can shake me if you keep carefully avoiding all the obstacles in your path!

"Gssshhh!"

The black lizard cried out, and another brown pellet shot towards me.

Here it is! Clay Gun!

It waited to shoot until I was distracted by avoiding a rock. But I'd been expecting it to happen at any moment. I got the feeling that this fight was the first time it had ever used Roll and Clay Gun together. There were more bullets this time *and* they were faster.

It's impossible to completely avoid them!

I jumped to a spot where the pellets were weakened and would strike at a bad angle. I chose the best spot I could, but it was still a dangerous position. I took the hits all over my body and nearly rocketed to a stop.

But I'd braced myself from the very beginning, and I knew I could withstand a bit of damage. It slowed me a lot, but didn't stop me. I sped back up to full speed almost immediately, making up for lost time.

You stupid black lizard! Did you really think that'd be enough to stop me?!

I mowed down trees like a rogue pinball as I chased after the lizard. My entire body hurt. I had a feeling my HP was getting low, but I was too afraid to check. I couldn't do anything about it right now anyway.

But now I could see the cliff stretching out in front of the black lizard.

It had finally come to this. I raced towards it to drive it over the cliff. I would make a wide curve to run along the edge and then slam into it!

The lizard definitely knew what I was up to, and I guessed its next move would be using Clay Gun again. *And if I can just stave that off, I'll win.*

If it used its attack while it was rolling, it would split its focus. Its speed dropped significantly the first two times it had done it. In other words, if it missed with Clay Gun, its lack of focus and decreased speed, combined with the sudden curve up ahead, would give me an opening. I just had to jump on it.

"Gssshhh!"

Here comes the Clay Gun! If I can avoid this, I win!

Pellets shot at me as I increased my speed and used a little hillock to launch myself into the air.

I slowed my spin and spread my wings, shooting out a blast of Baby's Breath. The force of it launched me higher into the air and I wheeled round, intent on my destination.

The Baby's Breath came out with so much force that I burned my own stomach, but I managed to evade the lizard's attack and gain momentum. Unfortunately, more speed meant less control. I was going so fast that I lost my sense of direction. If I was off my trajectory by even a little, I'd end up completely horizontal.

Am I close enough to hit the black lizard? Eh, I've come this far, might as well leave the rest up to fate. Come on!

"Gsshbbt!"

I charged into the lizard as hard as I could, the force of the impact knocking us both out of our Rolls. I slammed into the ground while the lizard was tossed up into the air. I crawled on my belly, scooting myself along, burned stomach

rubbing painfully against the dirt.

But I did it! Now all I had to do was catch that lizard and make it cure my poison.

I looked up just in time to watch it make a beautiful arc in the air, flying towards the cliff.

“Gssssh!”

The black lizard screeched, legs flailing.

My cure! Get over here, you jerk! Do you have any idea what you’ve put me through?! If you fall to your death, my arm is going to die with you!

I used the last bit of my strength to Roll at full speed toward the cliff and leap into the air, spreading my wings. I caught the lizard at the last moment and held it tight until we landed safely on the other side of the canyon. There my exhaustion caught up to me and my legs collapsed from under me, the lizard still held in my arms. My injured shoulder, wrapped in the healing grass, slammed into the ground. The makeshift poultice was already tattered from my Roll, and now it tore completely off.

“Raaaaaar!”

Owww, that hurts! I’m gonna die! My arm, my swollen, poisoned arm! Something burst inside of it! Something split, like my blood or skin or something!

I gritted my fangs against the intense pain and let go of the black lizard. It rolled several times and then scabbled up on four legs. It stared at me with its beady black eyes.

I’ve come so far! I can’t let you get away. I have to make you cure me. But my arm hurts, it really hurts! It’ll take me time just to stand up, and even when I do, I don’t think I’ll be able to move much. But if I let you get away now, this’ll all have been for nothing!

My vision was streaky and wavering, but I somehow managed to stand up. I’d all but given up on the lizard, but it was still there, staring at me.

Aren’t you gonna run away? Or are you sure I’m beaten now since I’m in so much pain? Fine, then. Bring it on. I’m barely hanging on, but I can still catch a

puny lizard.

PART 6

I RAISED MY GOOD ARM and pressed my palm against my pounding head. All that cardio had got my blood pumping, and now my poultice was gone. The poison must be spreading.

But I couldn't just sit around complaining. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my racing heartbeat. That should slow the spread.

Now that our rolling race was over, my real battle with the lizard was beginning.

I was seeing double. Two black lizards. *Is this really a good idea? I'm having trouble just standing up.*

Okay. First, I needed to check its status and come up with a plan.

Species: Venom Princess Lacerta

Status: Bleeding (Slight)

Lv: 19/35

HP: 23/108

MP: 50/127

My approach was working, but the lizard was doing better than I expected. Still, I'd just have to convince it to cure me. *But can I really catch it?*

I had no other choice. My poultice was gone and the poison was circulating through my body. I had to get it to cure me or I'd die. But that still didn't answer the question—why wasn't it running?

If it was planning to eat me, all it had to do was hide out until the poison incapacitated me. Did it figure I was so far gone it could finish me off right here without any risk of injury?

The black lizard just stared.

I'm gonna make you regret underestimating me!

It still had about half of its MP, which meant it could use Clay Gun a bunch more times.

Is this really how things end for me?

"Gsssh, gsssh..."

The black lizard began to slowly approach.

I'll burn it to a crisp with Baby's Breath! Wait, but if I don't catch it, this is all meaningless!

My mind raced. My head pounded. My body burned.

I would jump on it and dig my claws in. I could do it. The lizard was absolutely underestimating me, looking at me with those patronizing eyes. I'd show it the difference between a dragon and a tiny reptile.

I pounced.

I did it!

It seemed totally taken off guard.

Did you finally hit your limit? Heh heh. I have Poison Resistance! I'm going to dig my claws into you and then you won't be able to move!

But before I could, I hit *my* limit. I lost consciousness.

Am I...am I dead?

A hazy vision of the forest slowly appeared before me. Gradually, the fuzzy outlines grew sharper and I came to.

Wait, I don't feel the poison. Was I reincarnated again?

I checked both of my arms. They were still covered in bumpy black scales, the left one still slightly swollen from the poison. Yeah, that was my arms all right.

So, what was going on?

Something cool touched my wound. I rolled over to get a look. The black lizard was there, tongue hanging out, looking up at me. Wait, did it decide to cure my poison on its own? But why?

Just a few moments ago we were fighting to the death. Well, it *did* have a title skill called Cunning. Maybe it decided it would work to its advantage to let me live? What was it planning?

“Gsssh, gshh...”

It rubbed its cheek against my face. Was it trying to show it was no longer a threat? A sign of affection?

I pondered this, my mind still fuzzy.

First, it used its Venomous Fangs attack. Then it ran away on purpose and lured me out...we had a rolling race...I knocked it into the air and caught it, pulling it to safety...

Then it hit me. I saved it. *Oh, now I get it.* At least, that was all that made sense to me.

I know you’re the one who poisoned me in the first place, but, well...thanks. I scratched the lizard’s chin.

“Gssh, gssh, gssh! Gssh!”

It rolled on its back to give me better access, letting out a pleased chirp.

All right, all right. I’ll scratch you more. What a good lizard you are.

“Kyu, kyuu!”

It writhed around, looking up at me with affection. I guess the lizard decided it wanted to be friends, or at least that it didn’t want to kill a guy like me.

For a moment, I considered sinking my teeth into it and ending it—this guy would just get faster and more dangerous. But honestly, I didn’t want to. I think I felt the same as it did.

I won the first round of our rolling race, but I’m ready for a rematch any time.

I got up. My arm still felt a little strange, but not worryingly so. I was certain the swelling would go down soon.

PART 7

THE BLACK LIZARD was following me. At first I thought its home must be in the same direction, but it trailed me all the way back to my cave. It must've been really impressed with my Roll technique.

Ha ha ha, I don't blame you. Well, I guess I didn't mind the company. Lizards and dragons are practically cousins anyway, right?

"Gssh, gshh!"

Was it just me, or was it being a bit *too* clingy? As we walked side by side, it stayed so close that it was awkward. It was a venomous lizard, so I was still a little nervous—who knows what it would do if I let my guard down?

Wait, maybe it's trying to pick up pointers from watching my Roll technique?

On the way back to my cave, we ran into a pack of graywolves. I glanced over at the lizard, keeping the monsters in my peripheral vision. The lizard seemed to take the hint and pulled away from me. But instead of running away, it moved to help me surround the graywolves, who were clearly noticing that the numbers were not in their favor. And since I'd exhausted my supply of jerky, I wasn't going to let all this meat get away. Plus, I wanted the Experience Points. I'd defeat them all, no matter what.

We stared the graywolves down.

The biggest of the group, the boss, sniffed the air suspiciously. Maybe it realized the massive difference in our abilities. Or maybe it could smell that one of us was a huge walking ball of venom. The black lizard had the special skill Poison Belt, after all. If it bit them, they'd die for sure. I had Poison Resistance and even I nearly died when it bit me.

I needed to end this before they could run away.

"Raaaaar!"

"Gsssh!"

I let out a roar and the black lizard joined me. I charged the pack and the lizard fired Clay Gun. Beset on both sides, the graywolves began falling one by

one.

“Grrrr!”

They knew it was all over, but the graywolves had their pride. The boss leapt towards me, and I spun to avoid its Bite attack, landing a strong Dragon Punch on its unprotected neck.

My fist impacted bone with a dry crunch. The wolf boss’s body made a shallow arc in the air, then hit the ground, limp.

“Aroooo! Arooo arooo!”

Now that they had lost their boss, the remaining two wolves split up and ran away. I glanced over at the black lizard. It nodded.

All right, let’s try a combination attack!

I went after the wolf that broke right, and the black lizard shot Clay Gun to the left—no, both the left *and* right! It hit two of them at once!

Wow, it would’ve been fine if it had just taken one... I guess the more the better.

The pellet knocked the wolf in the back of the head and it went down, body twitching and spasming. I landed on its back and grabbed its neck.

Meanwhile, the black lizard showered the other wolf with Clay Gun pellets until it was dead. Bruises and gashes covered its body. *Wow, that was pretty grotesque. Still, it’s a useful technique, at least against the small fry.*

Gained 114 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 114 Experience Points.

Just a few minutes later, seven graywolves had been reduced to a pile of meat. I wasn’t sure why they kept trying to attack me; they must’ve really believed that their numbers would make up for their inexperience.

The meat was good, and the experience points were pretty substantial, so I was grateful for their idiocy, but I was also sort of afraid I’d end up hunting them to extinction.

I remembered seeing them running away from the Little Rock Dragon. A pity

to think that the next time I evolved, they'd take one look at me and book it. Annoying, since they were the monsters I most wanted to hunt.

The black lizard perched its little body on top of a graywolf's corpse and clamped it in its mouth, doing its very best to carry it. *Hey, I'm a little worried you'll lose your balance. I need to take multiple trips anyway, so you shouldn't push yourself.*

"Gssh, gshh!"

I mean, if you really wanna carry it, I won't stop you. Makes it easier on me. Honestly, the graywolves' timing was perfect. I'd completely run through my supply of jerky, and wolf was a good snack when I was feeling peckish.

Since we'd come this far, I wanted the black lizard to taste the jerky, too. And I still needed to feed the poisoned batch to those red monkeys. The lizard, a poison specialist, had also shown up with perfect timing. Now I could get as much poison as I wanted. I'd dip the jerky in the lizard's superior venom and then I'd *really* get those stupid monkeys. After that, they'd never come steal my jerky again. I would know—after being poisoned once, I definitely didn't want to go another round.

My two fancy sculptures welcomed us home.

"Gssh?"

The black lizard, who had been walking right beside me, suddenly stopped. Maybe it was surprised to see my sculptures?

Still, it got over its surprise quickly and followed me inside.

PART 8

AFTER OUR BATTLE against the pack of graywolves was over, the lizard and I rested inside my cave. It appeared much more relaxed now, and looked around curiously. After wandering around a bit, it poked at the carpet with its front leg and looked up at me.

“Gssh?”

Did it want to lie down? Its status condition was still Bleeding (Slight), and it had carried a huge slab of meat larger than its own body. It must’ve been even more tired than I was.

“Rawl.”

I made a sound that meant “Go ahead,” then gestured towards the rug. It seemed to understand.

It stepped on the rug gingerly, seeming to enjoy the softness. Then it curled up on the blanket and closed its eyes, letting out a contented little “Gssh” noise.

For a creature that had managed to survive so long in the wild, it was awfully trusting. Falling asleep in the lair of another monster was leaving itself vulnerable. *Your Cunning Title Skill is shaking its head in shame.*

But I supposed I had earned its trust. We had a man-to-man battle of strength, and at the end we recognized each other as worthy. There was no reason for it to be suspicious of me, or vice versa. The black lizard must already understand that.

I cleaned the graywolf meat, separating out a portion to grill and eat now, from the part to dry and preserve. I put the bit meant for jerky into a container and covered it with salt and piperis, mixing it around.

Yeah, that looks good. In the morning I’ll knock the salt off and string them up on a bare branch.

I brought a pot of charcoal and the meat to be grilled over to the entrance to the cave. I wouldn’t risk a stray spark singeing the carpet. I didn’t want to be cooped up here with a bunch of smoke.

I should probably build a fireplace and a chimney sometime soon. Although I wouldn't want to make a mistake and have a rock fall on my head or something. I'd like a desk and a chair, too. Maybe some more statues.

I had clay left over from the claybear, but probably not enough to do all that. I could thin it out with regular dirt, but then the quality would drop. And if I wanted it to match the rest of my stuff, I should try to have some standards.

There was another reason I didn't want to thin out the clay, though.

Alchemia's Magic Soil: Value B+. 500 years ago, an alchemist named Alchemia gained the Demon King's power despite being human. He used this power to create magical clay.

By shaping the clay into the form of beasts, he brought forth many monsters into the world. Most were subjugated and returned to the earth, but some can still be found in the Borderlands.

Apparently the claybear was a rare monster. And since the clay itself was magical, I thought it was better to not thin it and risk reducing its value and quality.

No, I wanted more of the good stuff. I wondered how hard it would be to find more of those bears.

I'd have to hunt a lot of them if I wanted a fireplace, a chimney, a desk, and a chair, but I'd gained a steadfast ally in the black lizard, so my chances weren't bad. *I think I'll go grill it up some meat while it's sleeping.*

I left the cave and glanced around. The monkeys weren't here today.

Now I had a stock of jerky, plus the poisoned version stored in the back of my cave. I was prepared to teach the thieves a lesson. That's what they get for stealing my stuff in the first place.

I scattered charcoal on the ground and lit it with Baby's Breath to grill up the graywolf meat. Making good charcoal took some effort, so I was being pretty stingy with what I had.

I went back inside to put salt and pepper on the grilled meat. At this point I wouldn't be surprised if I was eating better than the humans in the village. The

aroma stirred the black lizard out of its slumber. It opened its eyes, drool dripping from its mouth. *All right, come on. You can have some, too.*

The lizard threw a glance at the meat and then walked to the back of the cave.

Hm? You're not gonna eat it?

It went up to the pot where I kept the special batch of poisoned jerky intended for the monkeys and touched it with its front leg, its eyes glinting as it turned back towards me.

Huh? You wanna eat that? But you'll die.

But now that I thought about it, its description had said that this lizard ate poisonous things to strengthen the venom in its body. It also had the Resistance Skill Poison Immunity. Guess I didn't have to worry.

I ended up letting the black lizard have all the poisoned jerky I was going to give the monkeys. I'd have to cook up another batch at some point, this time using my new friend's venom—that would be plenty to torture those thieving monkeys. But I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I said no to those puppy dog eyes.

The lizard even used the special poison I'd made with the boiled down mushrooms as sauce.

As I watched it happily wolf down the poisoned meat, for some reason my grudge against the monkeys no longer felt so intense.

Wait, was that poisoned sauce actually good? It was possible that the longer I let it sit, the less poisonous it got. That was a thing, right?

I dipped a finger into the poison. Before I could lick it, my finger began to burn. Then it started turning white.

Resistance Skill "Poison Resistance" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

"Raaaar!"

Ow, ow, ow! It hurts! It burns!

I kicked the pot and screamed, completely taken aback. The black lizard

caught the pot before it toppled over. Apparently it really wanted that poison.
As a *sauce*.

Ahh, it's getting worse! It burned me and now it's getting worse! How can anyone eat this?

"Gssh."

The black lizard climbed up on my shoulder and took my finger in its mouth. The pain vanished. It had cured the poison.

Aw, what a nice lizard. I thought I was going to die.

Chapter 7:

The Double-Headed Monster Twinheads

PART 1

“G*SSH, gssh...*”

The sound of light snoring drew me out of a hazy sleep.

“Gssh...”

The black lizard dozed right by my nose. Its tail gently petted me in its sleep.

Wow, this lizard has terrible sleeping habits. It was the day after it followed me home, and the little creature had been clingy the whole time. I’d tried to move away from it since one lazy nip could kill me, but it insisted on sleeping like this.

I was pretty sure it had fallen asleep on the opposite side of the cave. How in the world had it survived out in the wild? Did it try to snuggle up to other monsters in their caves? *I wonder if it dug a hole in the ground and slept there. Maybe I should dig one in here?*

I didn’t want it to knock over my pots in its sleep. I worked so hard gathering and drying and crushing all that piperis, I couldn’t risk it getting mixed in with the poison. I’d pretty much gathered the carnivorous flowers to the point of extinction by now, so I didn’t want all that salt to go to waste, either.

Maybe I needed to make something for the black lizard to sleep on, too. A bed with a fence around it or something. A baby’s crib.

I looked at its sleeping face. It was practically clinging to the carpet, drifting deeply and peacefully. No wonder it was so comfy, if it had been sleeping on bare earth this whole time. Its scales weren’t as thick as mine.

After the lizard woke up, we went down to a nearby lake to drink. I checked both of our statuses to see how we were, health-wise.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 33/40

HP: 149/149

MP: 143/143

Species: Venom Princess Lacerta

Status: Normal

Lv: 20/35

HP: 110/110

MP: 131/131

No negative status conditions, and our HP and MP were full. The black lizard had even gained a level, probably from when we fought the graywolf pack yesterday.

The Little Rock Dragon had a title skill called Final Evolution, but there was no sign of anything similar on my lizard friend's skill list. It could still evolve.

I really needed to get moving on that, too, so I could be done with this Plague Dragon form for good. If the lizard and I worked together like we had yesterday, I'd level up in no time.

Unfortunately, neither of us had recovery magic. That would open up so many more possibilities as we fought together and act as insurance in a worst-case scenario. If only I hadn't chosen this evolution path, I might have finally learned Rest.

Every time I went through the forest and found a new plant, I'd used View Status. Today I located a patch of some colorful grass. I ran over and picked some.

Rainbow Clover: Value F-. Clover with rainbow colored leaves. Used to transfer MP to a member of the same species.

Hmm, this would really brighten up the space around my home and give me something nice to wake up to every morning. When I have more free time, I should come back, dig up a bunch and transplant them.

A favorite food of darkwyrms, who will often completely devour an entire patch.

Huh, in that case, I'll need to figure out a pesticide first. I could work with the black lizard to develop a poison that only kills bugs. I glanced over at my new friend, who blinked at me curiously in response. Despite our language barrier, it seemed to sense my high hopes and gave me an enthusiastic “Gssh!”

Oh, a four-leaf clover!

I wasn't going to do anything with it, but I went ahead and picked it out of habit from my previous life. I wasn't even sure if it was considered good luck in this world.

Blue, red, yellow, white, and a shiny gray. If I transplant all of these, I can make a colorful garden of rainbow clovers! Then I bet I'd get a whole swarm of darkwyrms to happily visit my house. I have a feeling they'd really have a blast.

I put the four-leaf clover down on the pile. Then I saw one with five leaves. I wondered if, true to their name, they went all the way up to seven leaves for the seven colors of the rainbow. But my excitement from finding a four-leaf clover was starting to fade, so I decided to come back to them later.

“Gssh?”

The black lizard looked up at me as if to say, “Are you finished?”

I nodded and we kept walking.

Smelling a sweet and tempting fragrance, I picked a nearby flower, only to check its status and realize it was poisonous. I passed it to the black lizard. I found a pretty red flower and checked its status: **A flower that blooms on top of human corpses. Often grows around battlefields and cemeteries.** I immediately jumped away. The rest of the walk was a bust.

“Gssh, gssh!”

The lizard came to an abrupt stop and turned towards me, making an angry

noise. I sensed caution in its voice, which put me on edge.

Hm? What's going on? Did I accidentally step on your tail?

"Gssh, gssh!"

I didn't know what it was trying to tell me so I just stood there as its cries grew higher and higher pitched.

Is it mad because I tossed that poisonous flower over to it or something? Nah, it looked like it really enjoyed it. Maybe assuming it would eat it was insulting somehow?

"Gssh!"

Suddenly a light enveloped the black lizard and several yellow clay lumps shot out. It was using its Clay Gun skill.

That was when I finally realized that something was very wrong. I jumped aside and hit the ground, rolling and leaping to my feet to get out of the way of the gun's path. Several clay bullets blasted through the spot where I had just been standing.

A bizarre creature leapt out from the brush where the lizard had aimed the Clay Gun bullets.

"Ga-woof, ga-woof!"

It was a huge two-headed dog.

The faces had creepy, squashed-in noses. Not only were the two heads totally freaky, I could feel an intense mental pressure as it squared off against me. But the scariest part by far was the contrasting expressions on the two faces.

The left one had an intimidatingly angry face, and the other one had such a sad crying face that it almost made me feel sorry for it. Both were so expressive that it was hard to believe it was a monster. The dichotomy threw me off balance and, frankly, scared the crap out of me.

I didn't even have to check its status to know that this guy was bad news.

PART 2

“G*RRR...grrr...*”

“Bow-wah! Bow-wah!”

The right head, the crying one, looked like it wanted to run away, but the angry one was ready to fight.

Is this a bit, you weird monster?

At any rate, I backed up and checked its status.

Species: Twinheads

Status: Fury + Fear

Lv: 39/45

HP: 155/155

MP: 210/221

Attack: 135

Defense: 94

Magic: 135

Agility: 138

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Smell: Lv 4

Acid Drool: Lv 5

Stealth: Lv 4

Twinheads: Lv —

Split Personality: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Confusion Resistance: Lv 3

Hunger Resistance: Lv 5

Normal Skills:

Rest: Lv 4

Gravity: Lv 2

Gravidon: Lv 3

Bite: Lv 3

Beast Tackle: Lv 4

Scorching Breath: Lv 3

Marking: Lv 3

Sacrifice: Lv —

Title Skills:

Delegator: Lv 5

Gravity Master: Lv 3

Tenacious: Lv 5

Infighter: Lv 3

Ravenous: Lv 4

Chaser: Lv 2

It looked almost funny with its mad and sad faces next to each other, but its stats were super rough. It was definitely not something I wanted to take on unprepared. Looked like the Little Rock Dragon wasn't the only dangerous monster out here.



Lately I'd only come across super easy monsters; I'd let my guard down. I even let some really low level guys get away. I kept checking monsters' statuses from afar, and if their stats were too high, I ran. But that tactic only worked if I spotted them first.

The dog had skills to detect its prey, stealth to hide itself and guarantee first strike, and enough agility to ensure its prey wouldn't escape. My usual battle tactics weren't going to work here. It had all the skills a hunter needed to survive in the wild.

Its skill Tenacious sounded familiar. I was pretty sure the giant taranturouge spider had it. So just how long was this thing going to chase me around?

Even if I ran, escaping wouldn't be easy. I bet Marking was some kind of tracking skill. If it were just me, I might be able to escape with Roll, but the black lizard's Roll would lose too much speed navigating through this maze of trees. Besides, the dog's Scent skill might mean it could follow me all the way back to my cave. I'd just have to break my usual rule and fight it here, then try to avoid this area going forward. Not even interesting plants could tempt me back to an obviously dangerous environment.

I was happy that it was a monster I could theoretically beat, at least. If it had been another C Rank dragon, it would all be over. Still, if I wanted to get out of here alive, I needed to come up with a plan.

All of the twinheads's stats were ridiculously high, and all of its skills looked stupidly dangerous. There were a lot of skills I'd never even seen before, but their names were pretty self-explanatory. It had a formidable balance of mid-range attacks, close-range attacks, and recovery skills.

I looked over at the black lizard just as it glanced up at me.

"Raaar."

"Gssh."

I could tell by its voice that it had come to the same conclusion I had. If we both wanted to make it out of this one alive, we would have to work together.

The black lizard used Roll, racing in a straight line right past the twinheads and

jumping into the brush, moving at its highest speed. It wouldn't be able to maintain that momentum through this terrain, but over a short, straight distance it was fine.

Its speed was such that the twinheads temporarily lost sight of the lizard and had to take a moment to reorient itself to its trail. But the black lizard hadn't run away. It was hidden, waiting for an opportunity to strike. If it used its venom, we'd just have to draw the battle out until it took effect. That was where I came in.

The head on the left focused on the brush where the lizard lay in wait. The sad face was the one looking at me, and since the monster's attention was split, I figured this was the best chance I'd get. *I'd much rather deal with the sad one anyway. It looks way more vulnerable.*

My plan was a simple punch, pummeling the twinheads with close-range attacks and trying to find a weakness.

"Ba-wow..."

The right head opened its mouth and howled, and a black light spread out from between the two heads. It spread wider and streaked toward me, too fast to dodge. The light hit me, and immediately my body felt extremely heavy.

That must be its Gravity attack.

With a strange deflating noise, the earth beneath the expanse of light began to sink, giving way under the pressure. The immense weight pressed down on me until I fell to my knees in front of the twinheads.

"Grrr...grrr..."

"Bow-wah! Bow-wah!"

The two-headed dog glared at me as I lay vulnerable in front of it. Then it pounced.

Uh-oh...

The force from Gravity lifted. I managed to stand, but when I tried to settle into a fighting stance, I couldn't shake the feeling that my movements were still slowed.

“Gssh!”

Bullets from the black lizard’s Clay Gun shot out from the brush, hurtling at the twinheads. The sad face turned to look back and quickly evaded the bullets. The other head, the angry one, opened its mouth wide and stretched out toward me.

Going up against a monster with 138 agility was pretty rough. My own speed wasn’t at a hundred percent, so I couldn’t fend it off. A direct hit from this thing could come way too close to killing me outright. I decided taking a glancing blow to my shoulder would be better than a failed attempt to escape.

Sharp pain tore through me as the angry head’s fangs sunk in. I braced myself against its superior attack power, but it still hurt much more than I was expecting. It seemed intent on ripping off my left arm completely. I needed to shake it off before it had the chance.

“Boww?”

“Raaaar!”

One of the heads swiveled toward the black lizard, and I pummeled it with my right fist. Dragon Punch landed cleanly, bones crunching.

“Arooo!”

It clearly didn’t expect it to hurt that much. Since the left head was the one facing me, the right head was completely unprepared. Everything in its body telegraphed that it had been planning to defend the left head.

I ignored the searing pain in my shoulder and dug my claws into the right head, taking hold of it. That was two for two. Then, suddenly, the black lizard appeared from behind, its cheeks puffed up.

“Raaaar!”

Go, black lizard, go! Poison me too if you have to! You can just cure me later!

Poisonous gas shot from the lizard’s mouth. The sinister-looking smoke spread, enveloping me and the twinheads all at once.

PART 3

THE POISONOUS SMOKE the black lizard shot out obscured my vision. A burning heat spread through my body and I heaved with nausea. On the bright side, the twinheads must be feeling the same.

Now that the left head's attention was elsewhere, I punched it hard and yanked my shoulder out of its mouth. Its fangs scraped against my flesh, breaking the skin further, but I didn't have time to worry about further damage. I kicked the twinheads right on the nose and sprang backwards, escaping from the lizard's noxious cloud.

I pitched to the side as soon as I landed, falling to my knees. I must've inhaled a whole lot of that poison. Man, I felt sick. But the twinheads could pounce on me at any moment, so I didn't have any time to waste. I forced myself to my feet, gritting my fangs against the pain of the bite. I had to check and see how much damage had been done.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Poison α (Slight)

Lv: 33/40

HP: 69/149

MP: 135/143

My status condition was Poison α (Slight), huh? I guess black lizard's fangs were worse than the cloud, then. I'd have to wait for an opportunity for it to cure me. I'd stick close by until the twinheads was vanquished.

The fight was definitely leaning in our favor, but it was too early to call a victory just yet. My left arm was useless—when I tried to raise it, it just trembled slightly. The bite wound was deep, and even worse, some of the poison had seeped into it.

Finally, the cloud cleared and the twinheads came back into view. I checked to make sure the poison had affected it as well.

Species: Twinheads

Status: Fury + Fear + Poison α

Lv: 39/45

HP: 113/155

MP: 190/221

Hm? It doesn't say (Slight) after it. Mine must be a light case since I have Poison Resistance. Yet another advantage in my column. I did some damage, but it had Rest and plenty of MP. It still had me beat in stats, and its abilities made it difficult to attack.

"Arooo!"

The right head let out a howl. The other head—the one I'd punched and kicked—began recovering HP. I would've liked to use this opportunity to punch it again, but the left head was keeping a close eye on me. *Yeah, you'd better recognize my power.* If I went by their expressions, I'd guess that the left head was the attacker and the right head was the magic user. The right had been the one to use Gravity.

Regardless, one of them was distracted, and it would be a waste to let the opportunity slip by. I wanted to do some real damage, so I aimed Baby's Breath and fired.

The left head drew in a deep breath and shot a gout of flames from its mouth, the force of it extinguishing my Baby's Breath and rushing towards my unprotected body. So not only did it have recovery magic, gravity magic, and close-range attacks, but *also* had a breath attack?! *What can't this guy do?*

I spread my wings and retreated, putting some distance between us.

"Ba-wow!"

Before I could get away, the twinheads charged me. Clay Gun shot off in its direction again. It sped up but couldn't evade the attack, so it took the rock bullets in the back of the leg, knocking it off balance. I expected it to collapse right on the spot, but it just froze.

Nice, black lizard! Great job!

The twinheads used its special skill Scent to sniff out the general direction of my friend, but the lizard was pretty quick. The twinheads was struggling. It knew vaguely where Clay Gun was coming from, but it couldn't pinpoint the exact location, and so couldn't predict its trajectory.

It moved so quickly that for a moment I wondered whether the poison was really working.

"Ba-woooow."

The crying head howled, opening its mouth wide. A black light spilled forth, swirling and growling bigger and bigger, forming a sphere.

What the heck was that?

I double-checked its skills.

Normal Skills:

Rest: Lv 4

Gravity: Lv 2

Gravidon: Lv 3

Bite: Lv 3

Beast Tackle: Lv 4

Scorching Breath: Lv 3

Marking: Lv 3

Sacrifice: Lv —

By process of elimination, I figured it was Gravidon. The longer charging time

probably meant it was even more dangerous than Gravity. I was surprised it would use such a slow-acting attack right in the middle of a battle, but maybe it was used to using its other head to defend while the magic head gathered power. Still, I couldn't just throw away an advantage against an enemy with such incredible sensory skills.

My best chance was to strike now, while the right head was frozen and its field of vision was narrow. Now was the time to use an attack that would do guaranteed damage. I was in a pinch, but this was still a great opportunity.

"Raaaar!"

I blasted it with Baby's Breath. If it used Scorching Breath again to counterattack, that would tie up both heads, and the black lizard could take care of the rest.

The twinheads's left mouth twitched slightly, and it casually stepped aside, ignoring my attack. *Heh. So you're not gonna fall for it, huh?*

I circled around to the monster's right side, trying to get closer. The left head strained toward me. I was blessed with poison resistance, but this monster wasn't. A direct hit from the black lizard's Venom Fangs would probably take it down.

"Gsssh!"

Even as I thought this, the black lizard appeared from the brush and blew a spray of mist towards the twinheads. That was its second use of Poison Belt today.

"Grrr...grrr..."

"!!!"

The right head stayed silent. I had a feeling that if it lost concentration, its half-charged Gravidon would fail. The twinheads scrambled to get out of the cloud of poisonous smoke as quickly as possible. I jumped right through it, aiming a Dragon Punch right at its torso.

The black lizard followed me into the cloud and leapt at the twinheads.

"Awwooo!"

The right head cried out. The black light inside of its mouth burst with a sound like an explosion. Gravidon must've failed. The smoke dissipated, revealing the twinheads with both tongues hanging out, struggling for breath. They stared me and the black lizard down, eyes glimmering dangerously.

Both the angry face and sad face had the look of wounded beasts. The creature's eyes were red and bloodshot from the poison. The failed Gravidon skill had busted the right head's fangs right out of its mouth. Its fur was torn off in patches, and it sluggishly dripped blood. A huge scratch painted one of its eyelids, swelling the eye firmly shut. The black lizard must have gotten a hit in while we were in the poison cloud.

Now I was sure it had gotten a mega dose of poison. If I hadn't wrapped up my shoulder in a tourniquet when I fought the lizard, preventing the venom from circulating, I most certainly would have died.

If the twinheads wanted to use my strategy, it would have to choke itself. / *say go right ahead.*

PART 4

THE TWINHEADS glared at me, its tongues dangling out of its mouths.

Frightening, but I was comforted by the fact that it didn't have much time left. The poison was clearly circulating through the right head. In moments, it would travel from its neck to its torso, then infect its entire body.

"B-Ba-wooww..."

It was using its recovery magic, Rest.

The right head howled, and a few of the twinheads's wounds healed, but the restorative magic did nothing against the poison raging in its veins. Its breathing was still ragged, its eye still swollen shut.

Species: Twinheads

Status: Poison α (Major)

Lv: 39/45

HP: 141/155

MP: 112/221

The twinhead's desire to fight was gone. The black lizard's venom was just that scary. No matter how many times it tried to cast Rest, the poison would just start chipping away at its stamina again an instant later. The fur around the right head's eye was already starting to fall out.

Honestly, at that point the black lizard and I could probably Roll out of there to wait until the twinheads collapsed. I was poisoned too and could really use the lizard's cure. But...

"Boww."

"Grr..."

The twinheads's two faces looked at each other, nodded, and let out a

mournful howl. Then it raised a clawed hand and knocked its own head clean off.

“What the heck?!”

It decapitated the right head—the one poisoned by Venom Claws. I understood it needed to stop the spread of the poison, but that was a little extreme!

If I had two heads...well, even if I knew my other head would regenerate once I evolved, I didn't think I would do that.

“GRRRRAAA!”

The twinheads's remaining face glared at me and howled. *Wait, now that there's only one head left, should I start calling it singlehead? Hah! You're just a little doggy that can breathe fire!*

The twinheads was one head down, and we still had the advantage. Although the left head had not gotten hit as bad as the right, it was still in the poison cloud. And it couldn't use that dangerous gravity magic or its recovery magic anymore.

But I could tell it still didn't plan to run away. I mean, it was probably too poisoned to consider it, but if giving up was even a possibility in its mind, it wouldn't have killed its comrade.

The twinheads was ready to fight me and the black lizard to the death. But how did it expect to win?

Will it do something desperate? And why was it staring me down when the black lizard was right there? Honestly, I hadn't done much in this fight besides draw the twinheads's attention so that the black lizard could hide.

Maybe it was focused on me since I was standing closer, but now that there was only one head, it really should be paying more attention to my companion.

So, what now?

Should we run away and just wait for the twinheads to die? It was on its last legs, though, so I was sure we could finish it normally. Either way, it would be a fight to death. Maybe it *would* be safer to take a more conservative approach.

What was that saying? “A beast is at its most dangerous when cornered.” And its skills...

Normal Skills:

Rest: Lv 4

Gravity: Lv 2

Gravidon: Lv 3

Bite: Lv 3

Beast Tackle: Lv 4

Scorching Breath: Lv 3

Marking: Lv 3

Sacrifice: Lv —

Hm, so the skills didn’t disappear with the head that died? It probably could no longer use the top three, though. They were magic.

Wait. Sacrifice?

“Raaaar!”

Run away! You’re the one he’s focused on!

I roared loudly to warn the black lizard, who was waiting to attack the twinheads from its blind spot. It heard my cries and gave me a puzzled look, but still didn’t run away.

The fallen right head of the twinheads lay on the ground. Suddenly, its eye flew open. Its fangs dug into the earth and it slowly used its chin to drag itself toward the black lizard.

The black lizard looked bewildered at the grotesque sight, but since I warned it, it took it in stride and quickly used Roll to get away. I was glad it wasn’t caught off guard.

The disembodied head was fast. Faster than its body, which was very weird. I

wondered if this was what the Sacrifice skill did. I didn't want to know what would happen if either of us got caught by that thing. It might have been from the poison, or a side effect of Sacrifice, but every time it moved, its face split and its flesh tore. Blood dribbled, bone was exposed.

I wanted to believe it wouldn't hold up for much longer. It couldn't catch up to the black lizard, but I still ran after the disembodied head until I was stopped by the twinheads's body blocking my path.

"Grr, grr..."

Even though it was riddled with poison and missing its right head, the monster showed no signs of backing down. I couldn't believe it was still staring me down with such strength in its eyes. I knew all too well how rough Poison α was on the system.

Talk about resilience!

"Raaar!"

I respected its tenacity, but I still wasn't going to show any mercy. *Sorry, but right now I just want the poison to finish you off.*

PART 5

“RAAAAAAAR!”

I stared the twinheads down and roared.

It didn't retreat, just looked at my injured shoulder with ferocious eyes. The Bite wound was so bad I could barely move my left arm. The twinheads was probably planning to rip me apart starting from my left side.

But I was working under the same strategy. If I had to fight the twinheads, best to start by destroying its headless right side first. I'd attack the torso before that huge mouth could get me.

“Raaaaar!”

“Grr, grr...”

We roared and howled at each other, and then we charged.

It tried to bite my left side. I tried to punch its right torso. Honestly, this was probably a stupid plan. If I left it alone, it would die from the poison anyway. I just had to pray that the black lizard could outrun its disembodied head.

I should've just pulled back and waited for the twinheads to run out of steam, then checked to make sure my friend was all right. I was poisoned too, after all, even if that wasn't an immediate concern—keeping still would slow the poison's circulation in my bloodstream until I could be cured.

I knew all of that. But I just couldn't hold myself back.

Just before the twinheads and I clashed, it moved to circle around to my left side, and I moved to circle around to its right.

Chomp.

The twinheads didn't anticipate my sudden movement, so its fangs crunched thin air. I fired off a Dragon Punch to its torso.

“Arooo!”

The impact hurt my fist, which was rough on me considering my current HP and poisoned condition. But finishing it off was the most important thing. I

lifted my trembling, injured left arm and dug both sets of claws into the twinheads's neck, holding on tight while I kicked off the ground.

I shot Baby's Breath downward to gain more height, then turned an arc and aimed us both back down.

"Gao...gao..." The beast moaned in pain.

But I'd come this far, and I couldn't back down now. I folded my wings and plummeted at the ground, using the lethal special skill I'd learned during my fight with the claybear: Nutcracker.

The twinheads hit the ground headfirst, and I quickly kicked off it and back into the air, shielding myself from the impact as much as I could.

Normal Skill "Nutcracker" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

"Raar..."

I pulled out of my dive so quickly that my balance was thrown off. A wave of vertigo overwhelmed me.

My status... I don't even want to check it at this point.

I looked down at the monster. The back of its remaining head was completely caved in, and its body convulsed. I didn't know the conditions for triggering the Sacrifice skill, but I doubted this head was in any shape to come after me.

I left the twinheads to its death throes and staggered in the direction the black lizard ran. *It's alive, right? It got away?*

My vision was cloudy, but I could walk. My left leg—the one I'd used to kick off the twinheads after Nutcracker's finishing move—could barely bend. I had no choice but to use Roll. I curled myself up into a ball and moved as quickly as I could. Even though my brain and body felt like they were both being torn apart, I rushed frantically after the black lizard, close to panic.

I pushed the negative thoughts out of my mind and just focused on rolling. But I just couldn't knock away this dark mood. Instead I tried to focus on why I was feeling so frantic in the first place. I knew if I got there a second too late, there'd be nothing I could do.

Why was I hurting myself by rolling so fast? Because I needed it to cure my

poison? No, that could wait.

The black lizard was important to me, that was all.

Even though we'd only known each other for a few days, we'd been through a lot together. At first we were enemies, but after our race we made peace. We defeated those graywolves together, I invited it into my cave, and I even treated it to my special jerky. We drank together at the lake, explored the forest side by side...

I realized suddenly that the only friends I had were Myria and the black lizard. I'd barely met Myria, and the next time I saw her, she'd probably just think I was an evil monster.

The only one I could truly be myself around was the black lizard.

"Raaaaaar!"

I roared, rolling even faster. The price for my speed was the poison ravaging my veins. I was already weak from the battle, but the poison made me feel like my insides were being run through a blender.

Still, I kept running.

PART 6

AN IMPORTANT REALIZATION was growing in my mind. The Human Transformation skill wasn't really what I wanted. What I really wanted was a *friend*. I wanted someone who had my back, just as I had theirs. Someone to relate to. I was lonely.

I rolled frantically through the forest, but my body wouldn't move like I wanted it to. My head pounded and swam. I kept running into things, whittling down my HP even more. And yet I still kept rolling.

The trail the black lizard had left gradually grew fainter. I thought I caught a glimpse of blood on the ground. The trail swerved wildly. I kept going, more negative thoughts consuming my mind the further I went.

What if—no, it can't be.

Please, God. If the black lizard survives, I'll never ask you for Human Transformation again. As long as I have the black lizard, I don't need to go to the village. And I'll stop complaining about everything all the time. So please, please don't let the black lizard die.

Moving was getting harder. My impatient heart pounded, pumping my poisoned blood through my veins, taunting me. Under normal circumstances, I'd think it was just the venom and fatigue, but I knew that wasn't all.

I caught sight of a fleshy lump in the distance.

I stopped Rolling, my quick halt tossing me forward. I crashed down hard onto my flank.

My consciousness wavered, but I gathered every bit of willpower and stood back up. I staggered a few steps and picked up the ball of flesh with both hands. An exploded eyeball with viscous fluid and entrails slipped through my fingers.

I glanced around and breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank God, it's the twinheads's.

I was holding the top half of its head, and could see the bottom half rolling aimlessly a little ways away. I looked up at the raw flesh stuck in the forest

canopy. The decapitated head had already been on its last legs, so to speak, and slamming into this tree had finally finished it.

That meant the black lizard must've gotten away! I forgot how much pain I was in and ran after its trail until it abruptly came to an end. I looked frantically into the bushes, but the lizard was nowhere to be seen.

"Raaaaaar!"

I squeezed out a roar. I heard a tiny *"Gssh"* and followed the sound.

The black lizard lay in the brush, covered in bite marks. A shiver ran through me as I realized it was the work of that disembodied head, but at least my friend was still alive. Relieved, I checked its status.

Species: Venom Princess Lacerta

Status: Bleeding

Lv: 20/35

HP: 28/110

MP: 14/131

Thank goodness. After a poultice with medicinal herbs, everything would be all right. Luckily, I knew where to find the right plants. I gathered the black lizard in my arms, relief flooding through me.

"Gssh, gssh."

The black lizard licked my face all over, just like a dog showing its affection. It was curing my poison, I realized. I had completely forgotten about that.



I checked my status to make sure the poison was gone, then picked up the lizard. I searched around for medicinal herbs; I was sure I'd seen some around here before.

Sawtooth Grass: Value F. Said to be effective against sickness if steeped in liquid, but only has a placebo effect.

Able to absorb small amounts of fluid, and often used as a styptic bandage to stop bleeding.

According to an apocryphal story, a merchant and his friend were in the forest when the friend struck him with a blunt weapon and stole his goods. The merchant happened to collapse onto a patch of Sawtooth Grass and narrowly avoided death. He went on to report his friend to the authorities, who was then taken to the gallows.

Yeah, this is it.

I gently set the lizard down and pulled up a handful of the Sawtooth Grass, knocked the roots off, and wrapped it around the lizard's injuries. I thought it might fight me, but it stayed perfectly still. I waited until Bleeding disappeared from its status and then collapsed onto the ground beside it.

Title Skill "Protective Spirit" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

"Gssh, gshh!"

The black lizard licked my face.

Hey, you already cured my poison.

Gained 234 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 234 Experience points.

Oh, looks like the twinheads's body finally gave out.

I was starting to worry the leveling announcement wouldn't come, but the monster must've hung on for a little while after its head was crushed.

I bet the black lizard leveled up a bunch from that, too.

"Young Plague Dragon" Lv 33 has become Lv 37.

Yep, everything is going smoothly.

And now that Protective Spirit was Lv 5, I could safely evolve. I just needed three more levels. I didn't want to fight any more monsters with weird skills like the twinheads.

Gained Normal Skill “Human Transformation” Lv 1.

Huh...? Wait, for real?

Bonus Story 1:
A Day with the Black Lizard

PART 1

THE DAY AFTER I met the black lizard, we decided to take a stroll through the woods around my cave. As the two of us made our way through the forest, it rubbed up against me. I patted it gently with my tail.

Having a friend with me was a truly different experience; I'd been alone for so long that I'd forgotten just how different it was. Around lunchtime, I found the perfect stump to take a rest on. I sat down, and the black lizard climbed into my lap.

I was just thinking how hungry I was when a pack of graywolves crept up and attacked.

The head graywolf struck first. I used my wings to deflect its tackle and pushed it back, throwing it off balance. I used the opening to slash its throat open. Witnessing their leader's defeat, the other graywolves turned and fled. Normally I would go after them, but today I decided to let them be.

I used my claws to clean and gut the graywolf's carcass, discarding the entrails and skinning off the fur. I grilled up the meat with Baby's Breath and shared it with the black lizard.

Since I didn't carry piperis around with me, the meal was very plain. And of course, I didn't have any poison for the lizard's portion, either. I briefly considered jogging back to the cave to get some, but decided having simple meat for a change was fine.

After lunch, I dozed off for a bit. The sun filtering through the trees was just warm enough; I was very comfortable.

The black lizard climbed up on me again and licked my face.

Hm? Neutralize Poison? But I'm not poisoned right now. Hey, that tickles!

Suddenly, I sensed a presence behind us. I turned and found myself looking at a monstrous bear with four arms peeking through the trees. It was a quadursa, a D Rank monster.

I'd never fought one before, but I'd seen one a really long time ago and had checked its status. It was pretty strong and a worthy opponent. The Divine Voice told me it had a large body and used its four arms as well as you'd expect, pulling off multiple attacks in succession.

Its eyes were focused right on me and the black lizard like it was waiting for the perfect chance to strike. It had probably been watching us for a while now. We had to decide whether to run or to fight.

The black lizard still hadn't noticed the quadursa. I wanted to let it know right away, but if I made one wrong move I had a feeling the bear would attack immediately. Somehow, I needed to alert the lizard to the presence of this dangerous creature without provoking it.

I gently tapped the black lizard on the shoulder.

"Gsh!"

It didn't understand my warning, instead licking my cheek again. Okay, well, that didn't work. Looked like I had to be a bit more direct, and risk provoking this thing.

We were far enough away from it that we could escape without too much trouble. I just had to make sure the black lizard knew what I was doing. I glanced over at the bear. Our eyes met and it moved one of its four arms.

Wait, did it have a long-range attack?

I picked the black lizard up and spread my wings around us, forming a protective cocoon between us and the bear. I waited about five seconds, but nothing happened.

"Gssh?"

The lizard gave me a puzzled look. I peeked out from between my wings at the quadursa. It was giving us a thumbs up with all four hands. Then it gave a wry chuckle as if to say, "Sorry to interrupt you." It lowered its hands and left.

What the heck was up with that bear? What did it think the lizard and I were doing, exactly?

PART 2

DURING OUR AFTERNOON exploration, we found a hidden cache of piperis. I'd pretty much exhausted the supply in the other spot and was happy to come across another patch. I picked a seed, smelled it, and popped it in my mouth. There was no taste, but a spicy sensation spread across my gums. *Argh, I just ate lunch but now I'm super hungry for meat all of a sudden.*

I was glad I wouldn't run out of piperis for a while, and I was even happier when I heard the black lizard let out a cry of joy.

I know it's trite, but happiness really is best when shared. I liked finding new plants and trying them, but that was where it ended. The thrill of finding an amazing new species was empty when I was alone. But knowing that I had someone to celebrate with made me feel much more positive about new discoveries.

The black lizard liked to eat its meat covered in poison; I wondered if it could even still *taste* the piperis seasoning. I had a feeling the poison was strong enough to erase any other flavors, and I couldn't try it myself without risking poisoning myself to death. If someone asked me to put my life on the line to prove it, I'd have to say no.

There was plenty of piperis, and I decided to swing back and pick it on the way home. For now, the black lizard and I continued through the forest. Suddenly, the lizard sniffed the air and raced ahead of me crying "*Gssh!*"

It seemed excited, like it was telling me to follow. Maybe it smelled something interesting? It must've been good if the lizard was this happy about it. I didn't have any particular plans for this walk, so I didn't mind going a little out of the way. I let the black lizard take the lead.

It was in such high spirits that I couldn't resist getting pulled along in its wake. Before, I'd figured that the black lizard wouldn't know how valuable the piperis was, but now I realized that it was happy just because I was happy. We couldn't communicate with words, so it was just a guess on my part, but I really hoped it was true.

“Gssh! Gssh!”

The black lizard let out another excited cry, and this time I found it alarming. I thought it was just my imagination, but I couldn't deny my looming sense of dread. And as we walked further, a horrible stench invaded my senses.

The rotting carcass of some animal? Maggot-infested flesh? A corpse? A terrible monster—maybe something undead? *Are you sure everything is okay? Maybe we should head back.*

I couldn't tell if the lizard had picked up on it, but ahead lay danger. My dragon instincts were going wild. But the lizard seemed so thrilled it was practically skipping. I didn't have the heart to stop it. And even if I did, I doubted I could.

Its pace grew faster, but I dragged my feet, letting more and more distance grow between us.

“Gsh...?”

The lizard turned and looked at me sadly, seeing that I was so far behind. I took a deep breath and put one heavy foot in front of the other. *Might as well get this over with. No sense in getting scared now.* If some kind of fearsome monster had something the lizard wanted, I'd just have to knock the beast out.

No matter what was ahead, I'd ravage it with a blast of Baby's Breath. I caught up to the lizard and we walked side by side once more. The thick smell of death drawing nearer set off warning bells all throughout my body.

The bravado I'd just mustered moments ago dissipated like smoke. Meanwhile, the black lizard hurried merrily on its way. I was sure of it now. We were definitely heading towards that mysterious stench of death. I was hoping the path would branch off, but no luck. We were headed directly there.

I sensed an overwhelming malignant force down to my bones. It was the presence of death, coming closer and closer. An undead king? Yeah, that was it. There had to be an undead king up ahead.

I was positive the black lizard's nose worked, so why did it look so happy-go-lucky? Maybe I was the only one who could sense this since I was a Plague Dragon.

I knew I should stop it. My internal warning system was going absolutely haywire.

Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure we should keep going this way?

“R-raar...”

“Gsh!”

I expressed my hesitance, but the black lizard responded confidently. *Fine, then I’ll trust you. I’m trusting you, all right?*

We walked and walked, and suddenly we were there, standing in front of an enormous, sinister mushroom as tall as I was. It had a large, thick cap with an eerie, mottled pattern that reminded me of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.” Most significant, though, was that the thing emitted an overpowering stench of death. It stank so bad my eyes watered—and that was an understatement.

This was it, the presence I’d felt. This mushroom was my undead king. I didn’t even like looking at it, but I had to check. I squinted at the monstrous mushroom.

Candidi Cadaverous: Value B-.

A mushroom called “The Corpse-Eater” due to its unique appearance and odor, which resembles that of a corpse. Regardless, it does not actually survive by eating the dead bodies of animals. It merely emits the odor of rotting corpses.

It is extremely poisonous, so no creature would ever dare to eat it. Even starving animals avoid this mushroom at all costs.

What kind of demonic creation was this? *Hey, black lizard—I bet you were attracted to it because it’s so poisonous, huh? Don’t tell me you’re gonna eat it! Please, whatever you do, don’t touch it!*

“Kssh!” The black lizard made a gleeful noise.



Sorry, but I can't share your happiness. Think about how bad your breath is gonna smell if you eat that thing! Besides, there's no way you could finish it all at once. Please don't tell me you plan on bringing that home with you! It would stink up the whole cave, and I'd probably die. I bet it would rot all my other meat just by sheer proximity!

"Kssh!"

I stepped in front and let out a gust of Baby's Breath. The giant mushroom withered from the hot blast, letting off sparks as it slowly shrank. Black smoke wafted up toward the sky with a putrid stench. I doubted anything in the world had ever smelled this bad.

Every blade of grass, leaf, and tree that the smoke touched lost its color and wilted, returning to the earth like I was watching a decades-long time-lapse play out in front of my eyes.

The strange pattern of the human faces on its cap flickered in the flames, swallowed up by the black char.

"Kssh..."

The black lizard let out a disappointed cry.

Sorry. Anything but the candidi cadaverous. I promise I'll make you an even better poison next time. Don't be mad at me, okay?

Bonus Story 2:

A Day in the Life of the Girl

THAT DAY, I'd gone out into the forest to gather medicinal herbs at Marielle's request. She had gone to the city to buy some medicine at her friend's shop, but she wanted to stockpile some ingredients of her own.

I wished she'd take me with her to the city, but lately she always went alone. I was dying to sample all the delicious food in town and window shop, too. But even more than that, it made me anxious to think about Marielle going off by herself.

I was sure that if I told her that, she'd just scowl like she always did. Maybe it was because she looked so young, but I always worried that she'd get kidnapped, or lost, or attacked by wild dogs or something. Even though deep down I knew she was more mature than I was, and capable of fighting off a pack of wolves, much less dogs.

Even if I hated it, I knew why she left me behind.

I went with her to the city a short time ago, and she'd said, "All right, I'm going to visit with a friend. She doesn't much like strangers, so I want you to wait here." Then she left me and went into the shop.

I heard cheerful voices in the distance, and I was so curious that I disobeyed Marielle and began to wander on my own.

A cat on the street corner was performing tricks and charging people money to watch. It was a creature called a cat-sith—rare, extremely intelligent felines that could use magic.

The crowd was large, and I had to stand on my tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the cat's performance. It balanced on two legs on top of a ball, balanced a smaller ball on the tip of its nose, and danced. Halfway through, a kind person noticed how interested I was in the performance and let me stand in the front.

It was so fascinating that I lost all track of time and watched until the very

end. I splurged a little and paid a fee so I could shake the cat's paw.

When it was all over, I snapped back to reality and rushed to the door of the shop, but Marielle wasn't there. I went inside and asked the proprietor, but she said Marielle had left a long time ago.

I ran through the streets asking everyone, "Have you seen a little girl? She's about this tall!" No one had. I couldn't find her.

I stopped to catch my breath, leaning my hands against a wall and panting. "I'm going to get in so much trouble," I muttered to myself. Just then, I looked up and saw Marielle flanked by two city guards.

Apparently, much to her dismay, they'd mistaken her for a lost child. She was desperately trying to explain the situation to them.

"As I said, due to my ancestry I *appear* young, but I'm not!"

"Yes, yes, we heard you the first time. Someone's been looking around for a lost kid. Maybe your mom or your older brother is out searching for you?"

"I-I I told you!"

The guards clearly didn't believe Marielle and chuckled at her story. I tried to intervene, but I just ended up making it worse.

"Excuse me! I'm the girl's mother! I'm so sorry about this!" I ran over and dipped my head to the guards. Marielle bit her lip and stared coldly at me. Meanwhile, the guards grinned hugely. I could still see it vividly in my mind.

Marielle hadn't taken me with her to the city ever since then.

I stopped as the forest shrine came into view. Everyone in town said it acted as a boundary, marking where the deep forest began. Beyond the shrine was where the monsters appeared.

I checked the medicinal herbs in my basket. I knew I should probably turn back soon. I had enough. I'd mainly gathered Sawtooth Grass, good for absorbing blood and the main ingredient in Sawtooth spirits, a cure-all draft. The Sawtooth spirits didn't actually do anything, but for some reason they fetched a high price in the city.

Well, the mind was a powerful thing, so as long as the people who bought it were satisfied, I supposed it was harmless. I just hoped no one ever tried to start something over its lack of effect.

I headed back to town and headed for Marielle's house. She was due back from the city, and I hoped she'd brought me back a souvenir in exchange for gathering the herbs. The thought of that put a little skip in my step.

I rapped on her door. No answer.

"Marielle!" I called out as I eased the door open. I always checked on her medicines and took care of her plants when she was away, so I was allowed to come and go as I pleased. I had a spare key and a room made up for me, too.

I looked around inside, but Marielle was nowhere to be found.

"Marielle?" I called out again. I wondered if she could be cooped up in her room, working on something.

I went upstairs and knocked lightly on the door. Normally I would wait until I heard her voice from inside, but visions of souvenirs danced in my mind. I was impatient.

I opened the door and peeked into the room. Marielle was inside, standing in front of the mirror with her head bent. She was looking at the reflection of her feet.

Suddenly, she whipped her head up and blinked at me, eyes wild. She grabbed the mirror and quickly flipped it down to the floor with a thud and a cloud of dust.

"Hrm... Looks like this place could stand to be aired out." She was trying to sound nonchalant, but the expression on her face gave everything away. Her eyes darted around awkwardly, and the corners of her mouth were tense. "C-can't you wait to be allowed inside? That wasn't very ladylike of you."

"I'm sorry. Um, I did call your name several times, so I thought you would've heard me if you were in here."

"O-oh, did you? Sorry, then." Marielle finally met my gaze.

Odd. Normally, we couldn't make eye contact unless she looked up at me, but

for some reason we were currently at the exact same height.

I looked down at her feet.

The soles of her shoes looked awfully thick. Was she planning on climbing a mountain of needles or something? She realized where I was looking and met my eyes with panic.

“Well, I’m very busy!” I said. “I-I’ll just put the herbs next to the fireplace!”

“H-hang on a minute. Wait, Myria! It’s not what you think!” She tried to stop me but I ignored her, shutting the door behind me and racing down the stairs.

I set the basket down and left her house. I thought back to what I’d seen. Was she wearing those shoes to make herself look taller? Did she go all the way to the city just to buy them? I guess her height really did bother her.

She must have felt self-conscious about it. That was why she was staring at her reflection. *I’m sorry, Marielle. But it feels really weird for you to be tall!*

Afterword

HELLO, it's nice to meet you! I'm the author, Necoco. I originally submitted this story to a certain website that features novels, but then I was contacted by Earth Star Novels, who asked if I wanted to publish. After editing and rewriting, it was turned into a book.

When I first received the message through the site asking if I would consider publication, my heart pounded like crazy. I wouldn't say it felt like it would explode or anything, but I definitely felt like I'd lost at least three days off of my lifespan. Because my heart raced like that for literally three whole days.

It was only the second time in my life that my heart had ever raced like that. The first was when a car plowed through a guardrail right in front of me.

Please drive safely to avoid accidents, everyone. You never know when something dangerous can happen. And sometimes it happens when you least expect it. I still have dreams about that and think "I would've been crushed as flat as a newspaper." Just so you know, there were apparently no serious injuries or fatalities, so please don't worry.

Sorry, I went off on a tangent there. I was using up space. I'll get back to the point.

I thought things would go smoothly with the publishing process, but there were tough obstacles standing in my way and one storm after another.

I went back and forth about how I wanted the Status Screen to be displayed. I asked my parents for advice but then they told my entire family about the novel. I was so embarrassed, I got into a huge fight with them for the first time in years. Then, I forgot the password to my email account and couldn't get in contact with my editor. Looking back on it I can say I totally self-destructed.

But it was all worth it in the end, because the status screen turned out wonderfully. I made several suggestions and someone worked very hard on the layout for me.

To my editor, I'm so sorry I was so demanding even though we were so short

on time. I'd like to take this moment to apologize. Even though I don't actually feel bad about it.

Supposedly it's getting more and more rare to see status screens in stories published on the web; most of them are written out vertically.

But why? They look so much better when they're written out the other way! Or at least that's what I thought, so I decided to do it horizontally. But as the manuscript went on, I realized that writing them out horizontally was so restrictive. I got so frustrated I even cried about it.

After going back and forth on it several times, I finally agreed to do it vertically.

I'm very relieved that it looks like this now. I have plans for even more parts about the main character's status in the story, so I hope you don't mind. There might be a ton of status screens in the second volume. Sorry if the book ends up being so thick you can't even fit it on your shelf. I guess you'll have to stack it on its side.

I'd like to end this by saying thank you to Earth Star Novels for publishing the book, NAJI Yanagida for the beautiful, realistic illustrations, everyone who supported me since my days on the website, and of course my readers who purchased this book. Thank you all so very much.

I hope we meet each other again very soon.

Writing this as I look out at the wilting avocado tree beside my window.

—NECOCO



Until we meet again.

[Signature]

20/5.12



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